

A New Friend

Chapter One - *Where Miss Roxbury makes an Unpleasant Discovery*

"Without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods."

Aristotle (384 BC - 322 BC), *Nichomachean Ethics*

A tall woman, in her early thirties, was walking back from the shop, a blue plastic bag swinging in her hand, humming as she trotted along the pavement. She trotted along, not really thinking of anything, when a strange feeling came over her. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, leaving a tingling sensation spreading down her spine. She ignored it and carried on walking, though her pace had slowed a little.

She frowned, wondering what was making her react that way, and the frown deepened when she thought she heard a whining noise. Still, she didn't stop, she was almost back to her house and, so, dismissing the sound from her mind, she kept going. She did stop altogether though, when she heard the noise again. It was louder this time.

She frowned again, looking around her for the source of the noise.

It came again, this time accompanied by gentle rustling. She turned, trying to follow the direction of the sounds and saw a slight movement in the bushes not three feet in front of her. She took a few quiet steps towards the bush and knelt down to examine it.

Annabelle Roxbury was horrified by what she saw.

A large, yet painfully thin black dog was huddled in the bushes, patches of dried blood and dirt clinging to its emaciated body. She exclaimed loudly with shock, dropped her shopping bag and whipped off her coat.

Gently, not knowing if she was causing the poor animal any pain, she wrapped her warm coat around it and slowly lifted it off the ground. It did whine a little, but seemed to pass out. Annabelle could only hope that the shock of being moved hadn't killed the poor beast.

Deftly, she hooked the plastic bag up by its handles in one foot and bent forward a little to pick it up with one hand. She slid the handles onto her wrist so her hand was free again to support the canine. It was awkward, but manageable.

Then very carefully, she made her way towards her front door, trying not to jostle her precious cargo. Having arrived safely at home, she shifted the bundle in her arms and got out her keys to let herself in.

That done, she kicked the door shut behind her and made her way up the stairs to the bathroom. She knew she'd have to get the poor animal clean before she could assess his wounds. She might even have to call a vet, if his injuries were too severe. Annabelle herself knew next to nothing about caring for injured animals.

She laid the dog gently in the bath, easing her coat away from its body, a faint noise indicating that it had regained consciousness. She breathed a sigh of relief, for she'd thought she might have killed it before. Annabelle reached up for the shower head, and turned it onto low pressure and low heat, and began to wash the dog's coat.

It took forever, but she managed to get most of the blood and dirt off its body so she could have a good look. There was one large wound on its left flank that she thought might need stitching, but other than that the poor thing seemed only to be suffering from starvation and exhaustion.

Annabelle sat back with a deep sigh, and then got up off her knees to fetch a towel from the airing cupboard. She picked out the biggest and fluffiest towel she had, and took it back to the bathroom. The dog had shifted round to rest its head on its paws, and large, dark, blue eyes were now regarding her steadily.

She moved forwards carefully, so as not to alarm the animal, and raised the towel up slowly and then lowered it again, as if asking for permission. The dog closed its eyes, and she took this as consent.

After much careful manoeuvring, and with gentle hands, she was able to get it out of the bath, wrapped in the towel, and resting on her bed. Once it was settled, she knew there wasn't much more she could do herself, so she jogged downstairs to look in the phone book for a vet that would come out to her home.

It didn't take long and she was extremely lucky to find a vet that could be over in half an hour. She explained the dog's injuries and general state as best she could, and the vet advised her to give him some water, but nothing else.

With the appointment booked, she went to the kitchen and filled a bowl with water, and took it back upstairs. Carefully sitting down next to her new friend, she placed the bowl next to its head, making sure not to spill any. She stroked its head softly and it opened its eyes.

Those steady, dark eyes looked at her for a moment, and then it turned its head and began to drink slowly. When it had drunk its fill, it rested its head on its paws again and closed its eyes.

Annabelle gently stroked its head again in what she hoped was a soothing gesture and completely lost track of time.

She jumped a little when she heard the doorbell and she hurried downstairs to answer the door. On the front step was a pleasant faced young man, who introduced himself as Jim Gerken, the vet she'd spoken to.

"Ah, we spoke on the phone! Nice to meet you Dr Gerken, I'm Annabelle Roxbury. Please come in." She replied and he smiled and followed her into the house, closing the door behind him.

"This way." She said, leading him upstairs and into her bedroom where the dog was still dozing. While he opened his bag and made ready, Annabelle knelt down by the edge of the bed and stroked a hand over the dog once more.

"Hello friend. This is Dr Gerken; he's going to make sure you're OK. OK?" She told him, in a warm, comforting voice. The dog opened his eyes and looked at her and the newcomer. Annabelle got up and stood back, allowing the vet to do his work.

He tsked and exclaimed when he saw the cut in the animal's side.

"Poor little mite! That's quite nasty. You said you found him this morning?" The vet asked, turning from his examination to look at Annabelle. She nodded.

"Found him huddled in some bushes in a right state. Can you help him? Will he be alright?" She asked and he nodded back.

"Absolutely. We'll clean up this cut and put some dissolving stitches in. He'll need a cone to make sure he doesn't lick them. And I'll give you a diet sheet for him. Looks like he's been starved and it's made him extremely malnourished. You see the ribs there, hmm? He's going to need some special food – you can get it from most pet shops" He indicated the place where the poor boy's ribs were poking through his skin.

The vet continued. "I'm amazed he's stayed so calm, most animals in this state have been abused and so can be very jumpy." Dr Gerken paused. "You know, it's almost as if he can understand what we're saying – like he knows we're trying to help, and we're not going to hurt him." He mused, shaking his head in wonder. He twisted back to face Annabelle again.

"You going to keep him Miss?" He asked, and she considered it.

"Yes. Yes, I will. I'll look after him, and make him better again." She decided.

Chapter Two – In Which Some First Steps Are Taken

“The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.”

Carl Jung (1875 - 1961)

Annabelle and her new friend began their new life together that very day. She was surprised how easy it was to look after him. She'd thought about getting a pet before, but had always thought of herself as more of a cat person. Dogs were smelly and messy, and far too noisy. Her new friend though, was too ill to be noisy or messy and he wasn't really smelly either. In some ways, she wished he was all those things. Her heart broke every time she saw his ribs sticking out of his poor body.

But she could fix all that.

She would fix all that.

Mr Gerken had advised that he (for he'd stated that it definitely was a 'he') would have trouble getting around for a little while. Not only was he malnourished but the cone would impair his spatial awareness, which could cause him to bump into things. Annabelle had decided that she could carry him for the first few days and the vet had agreed this would be fine. There would be plenty of time to help him build up his stamina again.

He clearly didn't like the cone, but he didn't make any attempts to scratch it off as Jim had warned her he might. If anything, he looked...grateful. She wasn't sure if she was just seeing things, but he had a very definite personality. He'd been really well behaved when the vet stitched him up. So brave in fact that she decided to name him Dogtanian.

Her very own Muskehound. She'd loved that cartoon when she was little.

She explained the relevance of the name to him as they were sitting on the sofa in front of the fire – about the cartoon version of the classic Alexandre Dumas story of D'Artagnan and The Three Musketeers. Most of the characters were anthropomorphisms of dogs, hence the title of the cartoon. The story followed a young Dogtanian who travels to Paris in the 17th Century in order to become one of the King Louis XIII of France's musketeers. He quickly befriended three musketeers (Porthos, Athos and Aramis) and fell in love with Juliette, a maid-in-waiting for Queen Anne of Austria.

She felt a bit weird carrying on this one sided conversation with her dog, but if she was honest, it was nice to have someone to talk to for a change. Even if he was a canine and couldn't reply. Maybe that was the best bit about it. She liked living on her own, in fact, she felt safer, in control. But it was lonely; even she had to admit that.

After a few weeks and some hearty meals for Dogtanian, Jim Gerken came back to Miss Roxbury's house to check up on her new companion. He was startled to see the difference in the animal, no more ribs sticking through, a thick glossy coat – it was amazing! Sure, he was still a little on the thin side, but that could be remedied. He examined the cut and was amazed again to find it completely healed, with barely a scar.

"Well..." He began scratching his head. He absently started removing the cone. "This is a bloody miracle! I can't believe how much improvement he's showing. You must be taking really good care of him Annabelle!" He exclaimed, moving the plastic carefully out from under the dog's neck. He threw it in the bin and was granted a hearty lick on the hand for his troubles. He laughed and scratched behind Dogtanian's ears.

"There's a good boy..." He said, still scratching. Annabelle smiled.

"Thanks. It's been great having him around, I didn't realise how good it would be. He's really special." She said, reaching down to stroke and scratch his belly.

“Well, he’s improved so much; you should be able to take him out for a walk. See if you can get him to run for a bit, he needs to start exercising and working those muscles!” Said Jim. Annabelle nodded.

Sirius Black, who was in fact, at that moment lying on the sofa of this muggle woman’s house, having escaped the Deatheaters who’d held him captive for the last eighteen months, thanked whichever lucky star or stars had caused him to cross paths with said muggle woman. He relaxed into the soothing attention he was receiving from these muggles.

Annabelle, (as he was very well aware of his ‘mistress’s’ name) had been infinitely kind and patient with him. She’d rescued him from near death from blood loss and starvation and she’d brought him into her home, nursing him tirelessly the whole time. Soon, he would have his strength back, and he could go and find Harry. He closed his eyes.

Yes, *soon*, he thought as he drifted off.

The two people smiled indulgently. Jim straightened and held his hand out to his client with a grin. She shook his hand and followed him to the door.

“Thanks ever so much Jim. Take care now, and give my love to your wife!” She said as he walked down the path to the road.

“Will do Annabelle! Any problems with Dogtanian, you let me know, OK?” He said back turning to waved and then turning back again, heading towards his car.

“Thanks, bye!” She yelled and then shut the door. She went back to the living room, and looked fondly down to the big black lump curled up there. *Bless*, she thought. She looked over at the time.

With any luck, she’d be able to finish that column for *The Quibbler* and be able to have tomorrow off. She'd be able to take Dogtanian to the park for some exercise. Poor boy must be going mental locked up here. She bounded up the stairs to her study and closed the door

Chapter Three – Where a New Bond Is Tested

"Sometimes the measure of friendship isn't your ability to not harm but your capacity to forgive the things done to you and ask forgiveness for your own mistakes."

Randy K. Milholland

A couple of months passed, and Dogtanian seemed to get his strength back fully. Annabelle was so thrilled to see his return to health, she took him out everywhere. They went to the seaside, so he could run along the sand and swim in the sea. They took short drives into the country, so he could run across meadows and chase unsuspecting cattle.

Annabelle felt lighter in heart than she had done in years. True, her furry friend couldn't hold down his end of a conversation or do the washing up, but none of that mattered. She'd fled the world she grew up in and hid in her little house for a good reason. She had known when she chose to run away that she'd have no one, and that it would be lonely, but she never knew how bad it would be. She'd thought that as she'd always been a bit of loner, that she wouldn't find it that awful. But she did. She felt empty. Somehow her new friend filled that void.

One Thursday morning, Annabelle Roxbury sat down at her desk and looked at the calendar, amazed that it was the 31st of July already. Time had literally been flying lately. She smiled at the thought. She had to pop out to post a few things this morning and decided to pick up something nice for dinner that night while she was out. Dogtanian was asleep on the rug in front of the fireplace, so she decided to leave him where he was. She smiled at him as she walked into the hall and was still smiling as she closed the front door behind her quietly.

Sirius's ears pricked as he heard the front door close. Stretching his limbs tiredly, he closed his eyes and willed his body back into its

normal state. He moaned softly when he was a man again and rolled his aching shoulders. A hot shower was what he needed. His mistress would be out for a little while he knew, so he would have the time. Slowly, he shuffled upstairs. Once he was in the bathroom he shed his stinking clothes and turned on the water. He hummed in pleasure when he stepped into the shower and felt the water run down his body. He was so lost in pleasure and relief that he didn't hear the door open and shut again.

"Can't believe I forgot my purse! I'm such a bloody idiot, aren't I Dogtanian?" Annabelle muttered as she came into the living room, looking for her purse. She frowned; Dogtanian wasn't on the rug where she'd left him. She shrugged. He'd obviously decided to sleep somewhere else. Her mind went back to finding her missing wallet. Then the memory struck her and she remembered where she left it – in her bedroom! She'd taken it out of her bag and put it on her bedside table to make sure she didn't forget it – how typical of her.

She walked up the stairs chuckling to herself at her own idiocy when she heard something out of place. It was quiet, but it sounded like the shower was on, and worse than that, it sounded like someone was in there! She could hear a deep voice, humming. She shook a little with fear. Then she scolded herself, it was a rare burglar indeed that broke into a person's home, ignored the wide-screen TV and went straight upstairs to have a shower.

'Yeah Annabelle, it's all the rage with criminals now. Maybe you should ask if he'd like to borrow your strawberry shower gel?' Her own voice mocked her in her head. She tried the door handle ever so gently and tried to ignore the thudding of her heart as it turned and the door slid open.

She looked down at the tiled floor and wrinkled her nose at the dirty and shabby clothing that was thrown haphazardly across it. She gulped as she looked over at the door to the shower. The steam had caused the glass to mist up, but there was a definite outline. A very definite, masculine outline. She tried to find her voice, ruthlessly pushing down the fear that had caused a lump in her throat.

“Er, would you mind telling me who the bloody hell you are and what you’re doing in my shower?” She shouted, her voice sounding a little frantic. The man in the shower’s hands froze for second and then he silently finished rinsing his hair and turned the water off. He pulled the towel down from the side of the cubicle where he’d hung it and wrapped it round his waist. He stepped out of the shower and looked at her. She absently noticed he had a nice body, but didn’t really register it. She was way more interested in what the hell he was doing here.

“I’m still waiting for an explanation you know!” She said, her voice a little firmer now. Her harsh tone was softened though, when she threw a second towel at him so he could dry his dripping hair.

“Thanks.” He mumbled. She scowled again.

“Look, um. Well...” He began, not really knowing what to say. After a few moments, he decided that actions spoke louder than words, and so dropping the towel, he transformed in the great black dog she knew, not caring that he was performing magic in front of a muggle. She gasped, her mouth widening in shock. Then she closed her mouth and swiftly walked out of the room. Sirius quickly changed back and started to dry his hair. Truth be told, he had no idea what to do. He hadn’t expected her to just walk out like that.

Annabelle sat on her bed and considered what she’d just discovered. Her new friend was a Wizard. An Animagus. Which meant that all this time, he hadn’t really been her friend. Oh he’d needed her when she found him, he had been close to death. But he was not a dog, he was a person, with a life of his own. And her rather abused and somewhat selfish heart, could only focus on one thing for the moment.

He was not a dog, he was not her friend.

Sooner or later he would want to go back to his own life, and then she would be alone again.

She got up off her bed mechanically and locked the door. Once it was done, she turned around and leaned back against it. She felt the emptiness again and slid down to sit on the floor. She pulled her legs

up to her chest and rested her chin on her knees. Not being able to hold back the tears, she pressed her forehead down and hid her face, letting the sobs come.

Sirius muttered a cleaning charm onto his stained and dirty robes, pulled them on, and then left the bathroom, looking for Annabelle. He had a lot to explain to her, and he needed her to understand. He felt horribly guilty for deceiving her, and for probably scaring her just now with his display of magic. The poor muggle woman was probably frightened out of her wits! He saw the door of her bedroom was closed and he walked towards it. His stomach twisted as he heard the sound of someone crying.

'Poor Annabelle. She must really be scared of me.' He thought. He knocked softly on the door. The crying stopped and he heard someone sniffing. He tried the door, but found it locked.

'Alohamora!' He said, pointing his wand at it. He rattled the door handle again, and was surprised when nothing happened. Inside the room, Annabelle smirked grimly at the Wizard's attempt to unlock the door. She wasn't stupid, she knew how to secure her home. There was more than a *'Colloportus'* keeping that door closed.

"You'll have to do better than that Wizard!" She called out, her sadness forgotten for the moment, and her anger beginning to rise. She tried to tamp it down. It wouldn't do, after all these years, to succumb to the hate and let the darkness take her over. Not from something as insignificant as this.

And at that thought, she felt her anger subside and she felt forgiveness flow in. He'd needed somewhere safe to recover, and he'd taken the opportunity to find that somewhere safe with her. He'd obviously been through an awful ordeal, considering the state he was in when he got here. She took a deep breath and unlocked the door. She opened it to find a very confused man looking at her.

"Come in then, Wizard. I'm sure you have questions, and you have a lot of explaining of your own to do." She said, waving him in and then sitting on her bed. She scrunched up to the wall, still feeling a little fragile. Sirius watched as this woman that he thought he knew, who

he now realised he really knew nothing about, pulled her legs up to her chin and regarded him calmly. No fear, or shock was evident on her face, she was just sitting quietly, waiting for him to speak, to question her, and to explain himself. He didn't know where to start. After a lengthy silence she sighed and rolled her eyes at him, realising that if they were going to get anywhere this century, she'd have to prompt him a little.

"So, you're an Animagus?" She asked and he nodded mutely. She sighed again.

"You're a witch!" He accused with a frown. She laughed a little.

"Yes. I'm a witch. I choose to live like a muggle. Most people I meet believe I am a muggle. Who are you?" She said, raising an eyebrow, Sirius thought about telling her. She might turn him in, if she was a witch then she'd know who he was. He didn't want to take the risk. Frankly, he couldn't afford to. But she had saved his life, he owed her the truth. He took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

"I'm Sirius Black." He told her, nervously waiting for her reaction. She nodded slowly, the facts of what she knew about him flowed into her mind.

"Ah yes, I've heard of you. Sent to Azkaban without trial, for a murder you did not commit. Supposedly died at the Ministry nearly two years ago, but held by Voldemort's people as a lure for your Godson, Harry Potter." Annabelle paused while Sirius gawked at her, completely flabbergasted. "I wonder how long they were planning on holding you before they tried to draw him into a trap? No matter, you escaped I see." She mused, and then smiled at the last part. Sirius managed to regain control of his faculties.

"How...how do you know all that...my captivity...my innocence...Merlin! How the hell do you know all that?" He demanded, yelling at her. She took it calmly, still smiling.

"I have my contacts. I know more about the Wizarding World's inner intrigues than even the people involved in them do, it's a knack. And that is the only explanation you're going to get on that subject. Now, I imagine there is somewhere you wish to be? And I also imagine we'll

need to get you some more clothes, for those certainly won't do and you can't wear any of mine!" She replied, chuckling at her own joke.

Sirius wondered if she may have a screw loose, or several, for that matter. But she was willing to help him still, even after he'd tricked her. Her heart was in the right place, if nothing else.

"Yes, I need to find my Godson, and rescue him from those horrible muggles he calls a family. Whether Dumbledore wants me to or not." He said firmly. Annabelle nodded.

"Very well. I shall help. Where is he?" She asked.

"Little Whinging." Replied Sirius.

Chapter Four – Where a Daring Rescue Is Executed

“I have never made but one prayer to God, a very short one: 'O Lord, make my enemies ridiculous.' And God granted it.”

Voltaire (1694 - 1778)

Sirius fiddled with the hem of the shirt he was wearing. It had been a long time since he'd worn anything this smart, or expensive, and he was finding it hard to relax in his new threads. Annabelle noticed and laughed at him. She kept her eyes on the road, but saw his scowl from the corner of her eyes. Really, despite the fact that he was older than her, it felt like having a petulant little brother in the car.

There'd been the inevitable argument about how they would get to Harry's relative's house on Privet Drive (Sirius had wanted to go by broom - not exactly travelling incognito). Then when it had been decided that they would take the car, there'd been another argument. Sirius felt that, as the man, he should drive. Belle, as he liked to call her now, had pointed out that it was her car, and that she would therefore be driving, so if he didn't like it he could walk. He'd spent most of their trip being sullen and sulking.

She ignored him though, and confidently drove the twenty seven miles from her own home, just outside Guildford, to Little Whinging, which was the other side of the town, nearly on the edge of the county. Sirius perked up a tad when he saw the sign saying they were only five miles away. He chirped happily, telling her all sorts of silly stories about Harry as a baby, as they zoomed along the A25 in her Aston Martin. Well, at least, that was what it looked like from the outside. Inside it was a touch more 'Wizard.' Despite only having two doors at the front, she'd charmed the back to expand and it sported a few comfy armchairs, a bar, and even a bed. Very cosy!

Harry Potter, 'The-Boy-Who-Lived', sat morosely on the tiny bed, in his tiny room, thinking about the tiny hope that he'd had that had just been crushed.

Since it was his birthday, and he was now seventeen, he'd thought he would be able to leave the Dursleys and stay at Grimmauld Place. Granted, with its memories of Sirius, it wasn't ideal, but anywhere would be better than here. The Dursleys cruelty had gained new heights this summer, and Harry felt bruised and broken from the beatings and the starvation. The fact that he had not been raped was small comfort.

His hopes of escape had been crushed by Headmaster Dumbledore, who still insisted that Harry was safer with his relatives than at the Order Headquarters. Harry scoffed at the thought and looked down at his bruised and battered body, and wondered at Dumbledore's definition of the word 'safe'. There was dried blood on his face and clothes as his Uncle wouldn't let him shower and clean himself up. He'd said that Harry needed the blood as a reminder of what a freak he was.

As if Harry needed anymore reminders.

He thought again of ending it all, of drifting off into peaceful oblivion. Some said that death was like sleep, and Harry could really do with some sleep. Surely it would be easier just to die than live like this? What was life really worth, if he had to live this way, with these people? If he couldn't live his own life the way he wished to? He was an adult now, in the eyes of the Wizarding World. Surely he should be allowed to make his own decisions?

He sighed and carefully positioned his sore body on his bed. He dozed for a bit and thought he heard the growl of a car engine. He got up slowly, grimacing at the pain in his protesting limbs, and looked out the window. Sure enough, there was a sleek, dark red Aston Martin pulling up outside the house. Harry recognised the make and model, as Dean Thomas had shown him a few pictures of it last term. He'd been salivating at it, wishing he could drive one, and Harry had pointed out to him that never in a million years would either of them see one in real life, let alone drive one.

Harry looked over to his bedside table to check the time, noticing it was only about six o'clock. He felt exhausted. Figuring that it was one

of Uncle Vernon's business associates, Harry shuffled his was back to his bed and slowly laid down.

He dozed for a few minutes and was surprised by the sound of raised voices, he ignored it and remained quietly half asleep, fearing that he would need every second of rest he could get if his relatives were angry. He jumped awake as he heard his Uncle shouting just outside his door.

"No! He will not be leaving this place! He is to remain locked in there until he stops all his freakishness! No! STOP RIGHT THERE!" He bellowed and Harry sat up in a daze, wincing at the pain in his ribs. His heart almost stopped when he heard the voice that was bellowing back.

"GET OUT OF MY WAY YOU STUPID MUGGLE!"

Harry's breathing hitched. It couldn't be...no...surely...this was a trick! A horrible trick! Some awful Deatheater had come here, trying to get him, using the voice of his dead Godfather!

It couldn't be Sirius.

He'd dreamed and fantasised for so long that Sirius would come and rescue him from this horrible place, from these people and all this pain. He must still be asleep.

Yes, that was it. His breathing calmed when he realised it was only a dream. He relaxed and decided to soak up the feeling, even if it was so bittersweet. The voices in the hall started up again, Vernon was still shouting, when a new voice joined in. Harry had to strain to hear it, but he didn't recognise it.

"Listen, Mr Dursley. We are taking Harry away from you and your family whether you like it or not. Mr Black here is his guardian, and so legally he has custody of Mr Potter. Now, you can either co operate or we can hex the shit out of you and that disgusting filth you call a family. Your choice." The last was said in a deadly tone that made even Harry tremble a little. He felt his stomach twist. The dream was

so vivid, and it was lasting so much longer than the others! He desperately prayed he wouldn't wake up before he got to see Sirius.

"Fine, you take the freak! You just keep your lot away from here!" Vernon shouted and stomped off. There was a pause and then a loud cracking noise, as all the locks on Harry's door snapped. The door then swung open to reveal his Godfather and a woman he didn't recognise. Harry smiled tremulously from his tiny bed, not really being able to see too well through a black eye.

Sirius blanched and felt rage rising when he saw the state of his Godson. He wanted to run downstairs and murder that man for doing this to Harry. He felt Belle place a restraining hand on his arm.

"Don't give into the hate Sirius. Down that road lies only darkness. They're not worth it." She warned him, and he sighed. He slowly walked towards Harry and knelt down beside him.

"Hey you." He said, not knowing what else he could say. Harry started to cry, sobbing and wincing as the sobs upset his damaged ribcage. He was muttering something through the tears and Sirius tried to hear what it was. He turned to Belle who was busy packing the young man's possessions. She came over and listened closely.

"Don't wake up, please don't wake up, don't wake up..." Harry was muttering. She felt tears come to her own eyes and placed a hand on Sirius's shoulder. She swallowed trying to speak around the lump in her throat.

"He thinks we're just a dream, he doesn't believe we're actually here." She said in a whisper. Sirius looked stricken.

"Oh Harry." He said and he carefully picked him up, looking over at Belle. She waved her wand a few times and the last of Harry's stuff flew out from under the bed and into his trunk. She picked up his wand and handed it to Sirius, and then she vanished the bars on the window. She opened it and told Hedwig where her house was, letting the owl fly there for herself. With a grateful hoot, she flew out the window and was away. She charmed Harry's trunk to follow them and led the way out of the house, wand at the ready.

The Dursleys were gathered at the bottom of the stairs, glaring at the witch and wizard as they took their charge away with them. Annabelle gave them a warning look and carried on down the stairs. She waited by front door and pointed her keys at her car, unlocking it remotely, so that Sirius would be able to get in. Once she could see him safely ensconced in the back with Harry, she turned to the Dursleys.

“By all that is moral and legal, you should go to prison for a long time, for what you have done. Maybe when Harry is better, he will report you for assault and abuse. Who knows? I suggest either way, that you run. The Death-eaters would like nothing better than to kill you for being related to Harry.” She said with an evil grin. Vernon bristled at her mocking tone.

“We’ll not run from freaks like you!” He declared and she shrugged.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you muggle! When they tear you limb from limb and burn you alive, promise me this – that you’ll remember it was your own stupidity and bigotry that led you to where you are.” She walked down the drive and stopped and got into her car, the trunk loading itself into the boot. Sirius had settled Harry into a comfortable bed in the back, and leaned out the car window to smirk at the muggles.

“See ya! Wouldn’t wanna be ya!” He called, laughing with Annabelle as she started the engine and drove away.

Chapter Five – In Which Three People Become A Family

"Life is partly what we make it, and partly what it is made by the friends whom we choose."

Chinese Proverb

Harry awoke to find himself clean, comfortable, and tucked up nice and toasty in a large bed with a fluffy duvet. He sighed thinking he must still be asleep. He tried to think of a reason why his dreams were so vivid lately, as to be almost hallucinations.

It had to be the hunger – he'd read somewhere, or maybe Hermione had told him that when people suffer from starvation that it can mess with their minds. That must be it he decided. He sighed and stretched slowly, frowning as his ribs didn't hurt. In fact, most of his injuries were gone, apart from a little stiffness.

He checked the time on the alarm clock next to the bed he and saw it was only nine o'clock. He looked out the window and noticed it was starting to get dark. Stretching again, he got up and went into the ensuite bathroom and found a pile of clothes on the toilet seat. He shrugged to himself and after going to the loo he got dressed and walked downstairs quietly.

He was beginning to believe that this wasn't a dream. He'd never been to the loo in a dream. Still he approached his new surroundings cautiously. As he left the room he'd been in he walked along the hall and down some stairs. He heard voices from a bright room near the bottom of the stairs and his breath hitched in his throat as he heard the deep chuckle he recognised. He walked wide eyed into the room and met the bright gaze of his Godfather. Sirius stopped laughing and stared at Harry intensely.

"You're...you're alive?" Harry whispered. Sirius got up and held his arms out to him and Harry didn't hesitate, he just ran blindly to clamp his arms round the older man, not saying anything. He didn't want to

let go. Sirius looked over to Belle and she gestured towards herself and the door. He shook his head firmly and led Harry over to the sofa. Belle shifted over to make room for them. Even when they sat down, Harry wouldn't let go. Sirius decided he was fine with that.

"I'm so sorry that you thought I was dead. I didn't want to leave you, I didn't want you to think I had left you. But the Death Eaters caught me – the veil was a trap! And I only managed to escape a few months ago. Please believe me Harry, I would have come for you sooner, only I was weak, too weak..." Sirius's voice faltered as he considered what Harry had been through, what could have been prevented.

"It's true Harry, when I found Sirius he was in his Animagus form and he was so near death I didn't think he would make it. His survival was a miracle but his recovery took time. Had I known he was a Wizard however I could have done most of it with a wave of my wand and a few potions. But still, I understand why he didn't tell me. He thought I was a muggle after all!" Belle said with a smile. Harry began to relax and Belle handed him a cushion so he could lay his head on Sirius's lap. Then she stood up.

"How about I get you some soup Harry? Nothing major, just something light and warm?" She offered and Harry smiled.

"Thank you, um, Miss..." He frowned a little as he realised he didn't know her name. Sirius slapped his own forehead.

"Where are my manners? Harry this is Annabelle or Belle as I like to call her, Belle this is my son Harry." Sirius said proudly. Harry couldn't take the big grin off his face when Sirius called him his son. Belle knew it was only a slip of the tongue but she knew it was fairly accurate as well.

"Nice to meet you Harry. Welcome to your new home. Sirius and I have already adopted each other as brother and sister, so I suppose that makes the three of us family. Albeit a rather odd one to say the least!" She laughed a little and asked Sirius if he would like anything from the kitchen. He smiled and asked for a coffee. She left the room quietly and crossed the hall to go into the kitchen.

In the living room Harry stared up at the man he'd only just got back. He smiled and shifted a little closer.

"Good to have you back Sirius." He said finally.

"Good to be back Harry. Happy Birthday!" He replied.

The following morning Harry awoke in the same bed and actually pinched himself to make sure the night before hadn't been a dream. It wasn't though, and he sat up trying not to squeal in a less than manly manner. Checking no one was lurking in any corner of his room, he jumped up and did a little jig. He stopped quickly knowing that Sirius would be taking the piss out of him for days if he saw him. He hurriedly showered and dressed, jumping down the last few steps and landing in the hall downstairs. Sirius and Belle were already up bickering in the kitchen. Harry came in and sat down at the little circular table in the corner and tucked into the full English breakfast that Belle placed in front of him without a second thought.

The night before, Belle had given him a potion in his soup that would help with any stomach problems the starvation and malnutrition would have caused. He would have to take it every day in the evening for a few weeks, but after that he should be as right as rain! He listened with a smile to the argument his new parentals were having.

"But if you had just healed me then I wouldn't have had to wear that god-awful cone for two weeks!" Sirius protested to Belle.

"You will recall Sirius, that I didn't bloody know you were an Animagus! I thought you were a regular dog, if a dog with a well developed personality. You must understand, I've been away from Wizards for a long time. It didn't even occur to me. Besides, you looked quite sweet with it on, Dogtanian!" She said, smirking. Sirius groaned and Harry chuckled quietly.

"Please don't call me that Belle. Bloody Dogtanian. The things those muggles come up with, I mean, sheesh!" He said. Then he turned to his Godson and offered a belated 'Good Morning'.

"Sorry Harry. We seemed to have got the bickering part of being siblings down pretty quickly. How are you my boy, did you sleep OK?" Sirius asked, ruffling Harry's hair. Harry gave him a mock glare. Belle came over and put more bacon on his plate. Harry was going to protest when he caught the look Sirius was giving him. He seemed a little angry. When he saw Harry looking he carefully pressed his anger down.

"Sorry again Harry. I just, those muggles...they....and then you...and you..." He sighed, and then huffed a little when Belle patted him on the back. She put some toast covered in butter in front of him and then went back to finish her own breakfast. She leaned down to open the grill door and a rush of steam flew out. She was about to explain the strange 'Sirius Speak' when the smoke alarm went off. Sirius covered his ears.

"What is that bleeding racket?" He asked looking around to try and ascertain as to whether they were under attack by weird bleeping wizards. Harry knew what it was and laughed at him. Belle laughed too and picked up a wooden spoon from the jar near the hob. She went into the hall and pressed the button on the smoke alarm with the handle of the spoon. The noise stopped and Sirius sighed in relief. Annabelle came back in and shut the door behind her. She went back to cooking.

"Well, anyway, what Sirius was trying to say before, was that it enraged him that you looked like you were about to refuse another helping because you were so shocked that it was offered. He regrets that he was not able to take you in when you were a baby and his frustration at being forced not to step in later on has made him angry. He is resisting his anger though, as he knows it will do him no good. Right Siri?" She turned to the former Marauder. He nodded resignedly.

"That brings up an important point. Won't Dumbledore be angry or worried that I'm not at Privet Drive anymore? In fact, does he even know you're alive Sirius, or that you came to rescue me?" Harry asked, taking a sip of orange juice. Sirius frowned and Annabelle looked uncomfortable.

“Um, well, yes he probably will be worried, I don’t know about angry. No, he doesn’t know that I am alive or that we came to get you.” Sirius said. He knew he had to be upfront with Harry. Harry was not a child anymore, he was a young man. So he and Annabelle had decided that they would let Harry decide what he wanted to do, and then do everything in their power to help him.

“Er, guys?” Annabelle said in a small voice that had both men’s gazes swing round to her with worry. She was wringing her hands a little.

“What is it Belle?” Asked Harry kindly.

“Um, Dumbledore will not be happy that you are with me. He really doesn’t like me at all. In fact he told me if I ever came near you Harry, he would kill me.” She said, her voice sounding strangely emotionless.

“What? Surely he would never...not Dumbledore?” Said Sirius with disbelief. Harry though, didn’t seem surprised at all.

“I wouldn’t put it past him. He can be as ruthless as Voldemort when he wants his own way. Though I don’t think he’s the torturing kind. Just incredibly self righteous, manipulative and unforgiving, judgemental and sometimes a little cruel.” Harry said thoughtfully. Sirius looked shocked. Annabelle didn’t.

“Judgemental and cruel. Yes, I have seen that side of him. And the others too. Don’t get me wrong, he is a great wizard and a good teacher. Unfortunately, he is also just a man, and men make mistakes, they have weaknesses. The Wizarding World has put him on a pedestal and he believes he deserves it. Maybe he does, but his belief in his own superiority has blinded him in some ways. He can judge people too harshly, I think.” She said quietly. Harry nodded. Sirius looked between them.

“Oooohhhkay you two. What am I missing here? Harry, what has he done to you since I’ve been gone?” Sirius demanded. Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat and sighed.

“Apart from all the manipulations over the years at school?” Well...I told him, this summer, about the beatings and asked that, after I was seventeen, could I leave the Dursleys forever. He refused.” Harry

said, looking down at his plate, not being able to meet his Godfather's eyes.

"He knew....and he left you there....I..." Sirius fought for control of himself – so he wouldn't Floo to Hogwarts right now and beat the living daylights out of the Headmaster. He knew Harry was being abused and yet he did nothing! He swung round to face Annabelle.

"And you? Why does he hate you?" He demanded, still angry at the old coot.

"Well, I'm not sure that I want to tell you while you are this upset. You tend to jump to conclusions when you're angry..." She said eyeing him warily. A soft touch from Harry and he felt his rage start to dissipate.

"I promise not to judge you Annabelle, whatever it is. You cannot be a bad person or you would have shown it by now. Whatever it is, we will support you. Won't we Siri?" Harry said with a warm smile.

"Right Harry. Course we will Belle, don't even worry about it." He said nodding. Belle looked torn. Should she tell them? Would they suspect her? Would they try and hurt her once they knew...maybe it was time. To let someone, or two someones in. She could only try.

"Well. You know me as Annabelle Roxbury, but I wasn't born with that name. I changed it twenty years ago when I abandoned my Father after he murdered my Mother. I didn't want his...taint to be passed on to me, so I became someone else. Dumbledore knew who I really was and he gave me no peace for my whole time at Hogwarts." She said in a shaky voice. Sirius looked pensive at the mention of her going to Hogwarts. He thought about it and then remembered. She'd been a quiet, bookish Ravenclaw a good few years below him. He couldn't recall interacting with her much, or at all even. Harry thought he knew where this was going, and if his suspicion was true...well...it seemed like they might have something in common.

"Anyway, I guess there isn't much more I can say other than I am not my Father and I have never nor will ever share his beliefs in any way shape or form." She declared hotly. Both her boys were nodding.

“And, what was your birth name then Annabelle?” Harry prompted. She gulped.

“Aiyana Riddle.” She replied. There was a long pause as the two men let this sink in. Sirius began to chuckle. Annabelle looked confused and so did Harry.

“Er, Sirius?” Harry asked frowning. Sirius waved his hands to indicate he couldn’t stop laughing. Belle and Harry just exchanged resigned looks and waited.

“Sorry, it’s just so poncey! ‘Aiyana’. Did Old Voldy get it out of a Baby Names book? Can’t you just picture him doing that?” He said between breaths. He put a hand to his chest to try and calm himself down. Harry and Annabelle snickered.

“I think it might have been my Mum actually Siri. Though it does create quite the comic image doesn’t it?” She said smiling and then she looked serious for a moment. “It doesn’t bother you?” She asked in a quavering voice. Both guys shook their heads firmly.

“No, not at all. My family weren’t exactly a laugh a minute either.” Said Sirius and Harry agreed with him.

“Yeah, I guess they really mean it when they say you can’t choose your family. All three of us are examples of that.” Harry said pensively. The other two considered it.

“At the risk of sounding like a sentimental fool, at least now we have each other.” Sirius said and then made a face at the fluffiness of his last comment. Harry and Belle just laughed. Harry’s Godfather just rolled his eyes, and then he turned back to Annabelle.

“So, do you, like, have any special powers? Being Mouldy Voldy’s daughter and all.” He asked curiously. She shook her head.

“Nothing out of the norm really. I mean, I guess I’m reasonably powerful, but no more so than Harry here. Oh, and I am a Parselmouth.” She paused for a moment and then continued.

“What you’ve got to understand is that most of Voldemort’s powers come from the Darkness that he has given himself over to. I haven’t and I never will do that to myself, so I’m just a normal witch. I try to stay away from anything that could make me Dark, anger, hate – all that. I rarely use magic in my day to day life, it helps me hide. Voldemort would not let familial ties stop him from hurting me or using my blood for his potions if he knew I was alive.” Belle said with a shudder.

“So he thinks you’re dead?” Harry asked her. She nodded.

“I ran away after he killed my Mum and he followed. I had some money with me and I bribed a few people to say that they’d seen me hit by a truck and that I was killed instantly. He just scoffed and said I was a stupid bitch who deserved such a muggle death, they told me. I don’t think he even bothered to test them to see if they were lying. He knew I wasn’t evil like him, you see. He thought that because his blood and the blood of Salazar Slytherin flowed in my veins, that I would be just like him. I’d be his heir and help him take over the world. I wasn’t like that though, and he hated me for it. He never saw me as a daughter, just a tool.” She sighed and took a sip of her juice. She looked at her now cold breakfast and huffed. “You know all this confessing has made me let my breakfast get cold!” She said, tsking the two men and shaking a finger at them. She pulled a plastic cover off a shelf and put it over her plate, and then popped it into the microwave for a couple of minutes.

“Well, now we all know who we all are, I think we can forget about who we all were before and become who we want to be from now on.” Sirius said, proud at his little speech.

“Um, come again? Do you mean we should start over, afresh?” Harry asked and Sirius frowned.

“Yeah, that’s what I just said, right?” He huffed a little.

“Nah, not really. Maybe it’s your age...” Harry said smirking.

“Why, you little! Listen Bambi; there is nothing wrong with my age. I happen to be a young man by Wizarding standards.” Sirius said crossing his arms and putting on a haughty look.

“Ah, leave him alone Harry. You wouldn’t want to launch him into a mid life crisis now would you? ‘Cause you know what’ll happen – he’ll start cruising round town on his motorbike, wearing Bermuda shorts and calling everything ‘bitchin’ and ‘heavy’.” Belle said, going over to the microwave when it pinged. Harry chuckled and then looked at the two people who’d rescued him from that awful place.

“Since I’m an adult now, does Dumbledore have any say over what I do anymore?” He asked them and they both shook their heads. Annabelle sat down at the table with them and Sirius got up to get more juice for everyone from the fridge.

“Nope, Harry my boy, your life is yours now. That doesn’t mean that he won’t try and tell you what to do, however.” Sirius said as he poured the orange juice in all their glasses.

“Hmmm...could I....or would you two...?” Harry blushed a little and scrunched his face up.

“What is it Harry?” Belle prompted him.

“Well, I was wondering, if we could all adopt each other, I mean, like, legally. Is that possible?” He asked, still blushing a bit. The other two gulped a little and then started to get a bit misty eyed. Sirius pulled a hanky out of his pocket and blew his nose.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me these days. I was cool before I met you guys.” He said morosely. Belle pat him on the back sympathetically, trying not to laugh.

“The answer is yes we can, though the Headmaster won’t like it. You can adopt Sirius as your Father and me as your Aunt, if you like.” She said to Harry with a shy smile. Harry nodded.

“And can we all have the same name? I would like to be Harry Black.” He said quietly. Sirius, who had just started to compose himself, started bawling again when he heard Harry say he wanted to take his name.

“I think that’s a lovely idea Harry. But are you sure you don’t want to keep your family’s name? They did love you so much.” Annabelle said, and Harry smiled sadly.

“I know they did, but I am so tired of being ‘Harry Potter’. I’m sure they would understand.” He declared and she sighed thoughtfully.

“If you don’t mind Sirius, I would like to do this. I would like to be Annabelle Black – your little sister.” Belle said. Sirius managed to regain control of himself and looked up to smile stupidly at his new family.

“I agree to all of it, on one condition; that we never have such a sappy conversation ever again!” He declared and they all laughed.

Quick A/N: Before you flame me, let me assure you that Miss Riddle will not be almighty and have amazing hidden powers etc. She’s just a normal witch with a nasty bastard for a Father whom she abandoned a long time ago. Ta!

Chapter Six – In Which the Nouveau Noir Family Shakes Things Up

"Friendship is born at the moment when one person says to another, 'What! You too! Thought I was the only one.'"

Clive Staples Lewis

It was all well and good in theory, them going to the Ministry and making the adoptions and name changes legal, but Sirius was worried about one small point.

"Um, guys, won't they hand me over to the Dementors the minute they lay eyes on me?" He asked his new family. Harry frowned.

"Didn't Belle tell you? You were cleared, um, posthumously for those crimes – they caught Wormtail." He said and Sirius looked shocked.

"They did? They caught him?" There was a long pause. "I'm free?" He asked and they both nodded.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you Sirius, it just slipped my mind. With everything else going on..." Annabelle apologised but the Animagus just waved it aside.

"Nah, don't worry about it Belle. Who cares? I'm free!" He declared jumping around and doing a little jig, not unlike the one Harry had done that morning. After he calmed down they began to make plans. Since Harry was of age, there was no one who could object, especially since Sirius was his legal guardian. Dumbledore had transferred his guardianship to himself when they thought Sirius had died, but now he was here and alive, his prior claim superseded Dumbledore's.

"How do you know all this?" Sirius asked Annabelle when she told them everything she knew on the subject. She shrugged.

"I spy on my Father sometimes. His spies told him most of this." She replied and Harry suppressed a shiver.

"Isn't stuff like this meant to be confidential? I'm sure no one at the Ministry could speak about it..." He said curiously.

"Yeah, it is. But Dumbledore told Snape, and told him to tell Voldemort, as a way of making himself seem loyal. It is a fairly useless piece of information, but Voldy likes to know everything there is to know about you Harry. He is not going to be too pleased when he finds out that Dumbledore has lost control of you!" She said with a smirk.

"Oh, and why is that? Surely he thinks I would be more vulnerable away from the Headmaster?" Harry asked her. Annabelle shook her head.

"No, not at all. See, the Darkness and his obsession with you are both slowly driving him more and more insane. His reasoning and rationality are being left behind and so his only real plans to get you were using your Godfather here as a lure, or having Snape deliver you." She replied. Sirius was sitting quietly trying to take it all in. He looked strangely at Annabelle.

"I should have put the pieces together before, from what you said. You knew I was being held prisoner by the Deatheaters?" He demanded quietly. Harry looked worriedly between them, hoping a fight wasn't about to break out.

"Yes I did. I wasn't strong enough to get you out of there. Not on my own. I left clues, sent messages to one of your friends – Lupin – but no one came for you. I was about ready to march in there anyway, consequences be damned, but then you escaped." Belle explained. Sirius looked at her for a long moment and sighed, he took her hand and squeezed it.

"They made the mistake of leaving me with the Dementors and no human guards. I changed into Snuffles and slipped away from them, the same way that I did at Azkaban. I'm surprised at Remus though, I thought he would have tried, that he would have come for me...I

guess I was mistaken..." He said the last part brokenly. Harry had to speak up.

"Don't think that about him Sirius, he got the messages from Belle, he wanted to come after you, but Dumbledore forbade him. I overheard them arguing. He – Dumbledore – threatened Remus that if he tried to 'swan off on a wild goose chase' then he would 'have him locked up like the dangerous Dark Creature' he is." Harry said hurriedly. He didn't want Sirius to think that Remus had forgotten about him.

"WHAT? He called Moony a WHAT?" Sirius erupted with anger, just like a volcano. He stormed out into the garden to try and vent some of his anger. It would not be good to repress it this time. Annabelle and Harry watched him out of the kitchen window carefully.

"Moony – Lupin – is his lifemate, right?" Belle asked Harry and he nodded.

"I think so." He replied. Belle looked thoughtful. Then she smiled.

"Well then, Harry, I think we just became a family of four. What do you reckon?" She asked. Harry grinned.

"Got any Floo powder Auntie Belle? I think we need to issue an invitation."

To say that Remus Lupin was surprised by Harry's Floo call was an understatement. He didn't know what to say or how to behave. Part of him wanted to scold Harry for running away from the Dursleys with a stranger, the other part of him wanted to throw himself through the Floo and give his little cub a massive hug. After hastily grabbing some essentials as he was told he would be staying with Harry for a while, the second part of him won. He stepped out of the Floo hastily and grabbed Harry hugging him for a long time.

"I'm so glad you got away from them young cub." He said into Harry's hair. He looked up at the woman Harry's had introduced as Annabelle.

"Thank you so much for rescuing him Miss, it really means the world to me." He said, his voice full of emotion. Annabelle smiled at him.

"Please call me Belle." She paused and could see the curiosity in the former Professor's face. She held up her hands and continued. "Before we go into anything else I think you should come with me and Harry to the garden." She said cryptically and he looked down at Harry's mischievous grin.

"What?" He asked, confused at the now identical smiles Harry and Annabelle were wearing.

"Come on Moony, there is something you need to see." Harry said, yanking him by the arm, out of the living room and across the hall into the kitchen. He didn't stop, and led him out of the back door and into the garden.

"There!" He said, pointing to Sirius who had changed into Snuffles and was perched on a stone bench. Remus followed Harry's finger and saw something that made his heart ache. The wolf inside him howled with pain as he regarded the sight he thought he would never see again. His breathing hitched and he barely noticed Harry and Belle quietly return to the house. They decided to give the two men some privacy and after leaving a note to say where they would be, they drove into town to watch a film at the cinema. Harry was just dieing to see the 'South Park' film after he'd seen some advertising at a local bus stop in Little Whinging.

Remus slowly approached the big black dog that was facing away from him, his hand outstretched. Instinct made Padfoot turn around and he yelped when he saw who was there. He jumped off the bench and rapidly changed back to Sirius. He held out his arms to his Moony and enfolded him in a full body hug. Remus gave into the emotions clawing at him and sobbed.

"They said you were dead! I felt the bond deteriorating, I didn't know if you were alive or not...I..." Whatever he was going to say was cut off when Sirius's lips silenced him. He gave himself over wholeheartedly to the kiss and he felt the bond flare around them, bursting with new life. Remus pulled back from the kiss and stared at his lost love.

"I hope you know, I'm never letting you out of my sight again." He said and Sirius chuckled.

“Likewise. You’ll just have to move in with us here then.” He said and moaned as Remus began to kiss his neck. He mumbled something incoherent.

“Inside Moony, we have to go inside.” He said unsteadily and then laughed as Remus growled and dragged him into the house.

Harry and Annabelle were a little wary of what they would find when they came back from the cinema, but they needn’t of worried. Oh sure, Remus and Sirius had er, ‘renewed’ their acquaintance a few times, but now they were calmly sitting in the garden, enjoying the sun. Belle had worried about how she would tell her newest brother about her past, but Sirius had already saved her the trouble. He knew Remus wasn’t the type to judge people on something they couldn’t control. He’d been a victim of that too many times himself.

Once he’d given her a hug and told her he’d be happy to join their little family, the four of them sat in the garden and decided what they would do next.

“We need to hit the Ministry and make our adoptions legal, as soon as possible. Tomorrow I reckon.” Said Sirius and the others agreed.

“You sure you want me in on this too – they may object to a werewolf...” Remus protested by he was silenced by three identical glares.

“Ooohhkaay then. That told me.” He said with a laugh.

After a pleasant dinner prepared by Belle and Remus, the four of them turned in early, wanting to be as well rested as possible to tackle the Ministry the following day. Tomorrow would be the realisation of a dream each and every one of them had harboured inside their hearts for the longest time.

A family of their own, who understood them and accepted them for who they are, and didn’t try to force them to be who they aren’t.

None of them got much sleep that night.

The Ministry official silently wished, and not for the first time that day, or in the last five minutes in fact, that he had gone out for coffee when his co-worker had asked him. That way he wouldn't be sitting here, trying to find some semblance of reason in the request the four people in front of him had just made.

Sirius Black who everyone thought was dead, was alive and in his office asking to adopt Harry Potter as his son.

Not only that, Remus Lupin, a known werewolf, wanted to also adopt Mr Potter as his son as was his right as Mr Black's lifemate.

That wasn't all either. Some random woman named Annabelle Roxbury, wanted to adopt Black and Lupin as her brothers and therefore Harry Potter as her nephew.

And to cap it all off, they all wanted to change their surnames to Black, and he was not allowed to tell the Minister or Professor Dumbledore about it.

He sighed, feeling a headache coming on.

"Right well, I think I understand what you are asking for. It is...unusual but not unheard of. In these dark times many people want to make the most of what family they can find for themselves." He told them, despite everything he was sympathetic to their situation. *Ah what the hell, he thought. Why not give them what they want? It is such a little thing after all.*

He pointed his wand at some parchment and muttered a spell to draw up the necessary document. Another flick when it was finished meant that it would replicate itself inside the Hall of Records, and that they could keep a copy for themselves. One more flick, and the document was binding and indestructible.

"If you could all sign here by your old and new names, once you've read it. The general gist of it is that from now on, Mr Black and Mr Lupin are official married, Miss Roxbury is your sister and Mr Potter is your son. You shall be Sirius Black, Remus Black, Annabelle Black and Harry Black." The official said and was almost blinded by the

smiles of the four people sitting in front of him. This would be a day to tell his grandchildren about, he thought as he watched them all eagerly sign.

“Now here is your proof, and here is my signature to say I will not speak of this to the Minister or Albus Dumbledore. You will be able to tell them whenever you wish. Is there anything else I can help you with?” Said the rather surprisingly decent Ministry worker. The four of them glanced at each other and found they were wearing identical grins. They all laughed.

“Well, what do you think Mr Black?” Sirius asked.

“Which one of us are you talking to there Mr Black?” Asked Harry with a smirk, indicating himself and Remus. Sirius started to get a little misty eyed. Annabelle rolled her eyes.

“Really brother, we can’t take you anywhere!” She declared and gestured for Remus to help him up and out of the poor man’s office.

“Thanks for all your help. It’s refreshing to find there are still some good people in the world.” She said offering her hand and smiling as the man shook it.

“You’re welcome Miss Black. Good luck to all of you.” He replied and she looked down at his name plate.

“Thanks Ted. See ya!” She said and walked out the office behind a laughing Harry and Remus and a sniffing Sirius.

Ted, the Ministry official, thought about what had just happened. He supposed he shouldn’t really have done it. It wasn’t illegal or anything, but some people in some high places weren’t going to like it. He scoffed, that was too bad, he thought, because if anyone deserved some happiness, it was those four. He didn’t know what the woman’s story was, but she must have been a good person for Harry Potter to welcome her into his family. Well, he was Harry Black now, he corrected himself. He thought about it some more. This could end up rather entertaining. He chuckled and then went back to work.

Harry sat in the back of the car as they drove back to their new home and considered what had just happened. He had a really family now, they were the New Family Black. He had so much to tell his friends, he couldn't wait to owl them. Hermione would disapprove he was sure, but he knew he would be able to get her to understand why he had done it. She would be happy for him in the end. His heart skipped a beat as he thought about her.

She was staying at Grimmauld Place for the rest of the summer and was one of the reasons he had wanted to go there so badly. Maybe he could persuade her parents to let her stay with him and his new parents. He longed to see her. He decided to ask Aunt Belle, she would know what to do. He let his mind wander as he thought about Hermione. He really missed her. Ron too, but with Hermione it was something else. Something that had been growing and developing over the last six years. He sighed.

"Oho! I think our little Bambi might be in luuurve!" Said Sirius, pulling a face at Harry. Remus laughed and sniffed a little.

"Hey, I think you might be right Padfoot. He certainly smells like he is." Remus teased. Harry glared at them, but kept silent.

"Now, now boys. Don't be mean. I'm sure he will tell us all about it when he wants to and not before. Clear?" She said in a firm but kind voice.

"Oh no. I knew there would be downside to this family thing. You're going to nag us to death aren't you Belle?" Sirius complained and Belle thought about it.

"Probably Siri. Probably." Sirius groaned and Harry snickered.

"Aww, come on Harry! Just give us her name, pleeeeeeease?" Sirius whined and Harry rolled his eyes at him.

"It's Hermione." He mumbled and crossed his arms defensively and stared out the window.

"Eh? What did he say?" Said Sirius who was in the front with Belle. Remus had heard him though and his eyes were bright.

“That’s great Harry! She’s a wonderful woman. Have you told her?” He asked and Sirius demanded to know who they were speaking about. Harry silenced him with a glare and turned back to Remus.

“No, I haven’t. She’s at Order Headquarters this summer and I was planning to tell her when Dumbledore let me leave the Dursleys, but then he said I had to stay there until the beginning of seventh year. I didn’t know what to do so I thought I would wait until I saw her on the train. Then as things got...worse and I thought I wouldn’t live that long, I thought about writing her a letter.” He said to the werewolf. Remus sighed and gave him a hug. When he pulled away, he had a determined look on his face.

“Right then people. We have a new mission: Operation ‘Get Hermione to Our House with Dumbledore None the Wiser.’ I won’t lie to you, it’s going to be tough, but I believe we can do it. Who’s with me?” He said in a melodramatic voice.

“I’m with you Captain!” Declared Sirius in a similar manner. Belle sighed.

“Me too!” Said Belle with a laugh.

“Come then. There’s no time to waste. Where do we start?”

Chapter Seven – In Which Plans Are Made for Young Love

“Family isn't about whose blood you have. It's about who you care about.”

Trey Parker and Matt Stone

The ‘New Family Black’ were enjoying a quiet evening a few days after their visit to the Ministry. Remus was lying on the big corner sofa with his head on Sirius’ lap, Sirius pretending to read a book, while in reality the two of them watched Harry and Belle using paddles to control something called a ‘Playstation’. It was quite new apparently and he wasn’t at all sure the game they were playing was healthy. It was called ‘Grand Theft Auto’ and appeared to be pretty violent.

He closed his eyes as he thought about the last couple of days. They hadn’t had many ideas about how to retrieve Hermione without the Headmaster finding out. Harry did point out that it was only a matter of time because the Order was due to make one of its visits to check on him at Privet Drive that very day. So he would know Harry was no longer there. Harry told them that he tried to feel guilty about all the people who would be worried about him, and to be honest he was a little upset for how Molly, Hermione and the other Weasleys would feel...but he couldn’t feel that sorry for Dumbledore. It would be good for him to learn he didn’t have control of every situation and that Harry was now an adult who could, and would chose is own path.

None of them were stupid however, and they realised the need for added protection. The four of them had stayed up all night after they returned from London and discussed what they could do to protect their home. After a while, Belle had had a moment of inspiration and dug out one of the books she’d been able to retrieve about her ancestors. In it was described a powerful warding spell, that would not only prevent anyone who was not a member of the household entry to the property by apparition, Floo or even the front door – but it would also slowly remove the memory of the house from anyone who knew the address or had ever been there. Even owls and the Royal

Mail wouldn't remember the house was there. It had been one of Slytherin's inventions and over time it had been lost to obscurity. Mainly because the members of his family were a closed off reticent bunch, who didn't want to share any of their secrets with anyone.

Because of their magical adoptions they could perform the warding spells together, as a family unit, and protect their home from Voldemort and the Order. Once it had been done, Remus had asked Belle where she'd got the book from.

"Stole it from dear old Dad." She explained. Remus and the others gasped in shock.

"How is that possible?" Asked Harry, curious as to how she was still alive after stealing from Voldemort.

"Eh? It was easy. He wards everything so that only 'one who has the blood of Salazar Slytherin flowing in their veins' can pass. And as he thinks I'm dead, he doesn't feel the need to set up any additional wards. Moron!" She said with a laugh. If at all possible her family looked even more shocked.

"What? Don't look at me like that! He's a bloody stupid insane wazzock!" She protested.

"Ah...while I don't disagree..." Began Remus, frowning as he couldn't think of the right words.

"Look, if he really was an 'evil genius' or 'all powerful Dark Lord' as he claims to be, he would not rely on the story of my death, as he never saw my body. He wanted me dead, so he was happy to believe it, his brain let him accept it, no questions asked. But if he was thinking clearly, which I doubt he has in a very long time, he would consider and cater for the possibility that I could be alive and adjust his wards accordingly. But he doesn't, because he is an idiot: a person of subnormal intelligence. A person of profound mental retardation. Or in more concise terms, a stupid wanker!" The men in the Black family just gaped as their Annabelle chortled at the stupidity of Voldemort. Because even they had to admit that his oversight where her supposed death was concerned was a very dangerous thing for him to do to himself. A master planner would not have overlooked even

the small chance that she was alive. It just showed that his insanity had greatly impaired his mental capabilities. Such as they were.

Remus chuckled quietly to himself as he remembered that conversation. Immediately after that was when Belle had introduced Harry to the muggle device she called a games console. Not wanting to pry, but having been assured by Belle that it would be fine, the three of them had asked awkwardly where all her money had come from. They were just curious, considering she had been sponsored by Albus, albeit grudgingly, to attend Hogwarts since she didn't have a bean to her name at the time. She had sniggered and told them wouldn't believe her but they'd pushed a little and she revealed that she'd won it all on the muggle lottery. Sirius had accused her of taking a potion or casting a spell to fix it and she admitted that at the time it hadn't even occurred to her to try that and that she'd bought the ticket on a whim. Harry had asked how much she'd won.

"Um, thirteen million pounds." She mumbled. Sirius didn't hear and looked curiously at her, but Harry, who was sitting closer, gulped. Remus had heard, thanks to his sharp ears, but didn't know anything about muggle money. A million was a lot though, right?

"Sweet Merlin! That's like, like....um...two million and six hundred thousand Galleons." Said Harry, working it out in his head. Mental arithmetic was one of his strong points.

"Fuck me!" Declared Sirius and Belle laughed.

"Surely you have more than me Siri? And you Harry?" She said, smiling. Sirius frowned at her, confused at her question.

"What? Oh, yes I do. No, I wasn't surprised at how much you have, though it is a lot. It was Harry. How on earth did you work that out in your head son?" Sirius turned to him, amazed. Harry laughed a little sheepishly and then laughed even more as his new Dad narrowed his eyes at him, suspiciously. "You haven't been...studying?" He demanded, saying the last word with obvious distaste. Harry laughed even more.

Remus smiled to himself thinking about how much he was enjoying living with his new pack. Oh it wasn't all chocolate boxes and roses.

Being married was strange and exhilarating, though living with Sirius and sharing a bed involved more wind than he'd bargained for. His husband obviously didn't feel the need to be on his best behaviour all the time.

Remus sighed a little and thought about taking a nap maybe. He was very comfortable where he was and there wasn't anything particular he needed to do...he flinched as an Order summons flashed in his head. Trust Albus to ruin his peace just as he was about to nod off. He sat up grumpily and stretched. Sirius looked away from his book questioningly.

"Moony? What's up?" He asked and Remus grimaced slightly and tapped his head. He raised his voice a little so Harry and Annabelle would hear.

"Dumbledore's called an Order meeting at Grimmauld Place. It seems they've probably learned of your disappearance from the Dursleys Harry." Remus told them all. This announcement was met by three identical scowls. They all of them had their reasons for disliking and distrusting the Headmaster. In some ways, he'd judged all of them on their heritage and not who they were as people.

"Right. We haven't agreed yet. Do we let them worry endlessly about where he is? Or do we tell him we've heard from Harry, know that he is safe, but are unable to reveal his location?" Sirius asked. They all considered it, but looked to Harry.

"It's up to you Harry. We'll handle this however you want; it's your life after all." Remus assured him and Sirius and Belle nodded their agreement. Harry looked down for a moment and sighed.

"As much as I would like to let the old man stew, as well as some others, I cannot in all good conscience let Molly, or any of the Weasleys or Hermione worry unnecessarily. So how about Moony goes to the meeting, tells them that I left the Dursleys of my own will, under my own steam, having decided that now I'm of age that I decide what I do and where I live. I stopped by your place and told you where I would be, but extracted an Unbreakable Vow that you would not tell of my location to anyone without my consent. We could

even do the Vow to stop him leeching it from your mind.” Harry said quietly. Remus nodded and so did the other two.

“That may be a good idea. But what about Hermione?” Remus asked, not wanting to miss this chance to get Harry his girl. Harry smiled.

“I can give you permission after the Vow to lead Hermione to my location without exactly telling her where it is, and then once you’re here you can give her permission to enter the wards. What d’you guys reckon?” Harry asked his Auntie Belle and his Dad.

“Great idea Bambi. Moony, is that OK with you?” Sirius asked. Remus nodded. They looked at Belle.

“Fine with me too. Well, we better get cracking, or they’ll wonder why you’re late.” She said and they all sat on the floor, ready to make the Vow.

Remus was only a few minutes behind the others when he reach the Order HQ. He hurried into the house and made his way to the back of the house to the room where everyone was gathering. He looked around at familiar faces and his suspicions on the reason for the meeting were confirmed. Everyone looked very worried. All apart from Snape of course, he just looked fed up and pissed off. Remus noted that Ron and Hermione were not present and figured they must be somewhere else in the house. Dumbledore called the meeting to order.

“Everyone if I could have your attention. Now, at an unknown time, approximately three or four days ago, Harry Potter disappeared from his relative’s house accompanied by an unknown man and woman in a muggle car. Mr and Mrs Dursley have reported that the man and woman threatened them extensively before removing Harry from their household and driving away. Nothing has been heard since. None of his friends have heard anything from him. Furthermore, Severus has reported that there has been no activity from Tom, nothing to indicate that he has Harry. While it may be possible that he has him and is keeping it quiet, I believe that this is unlikely. Unfortunately, we cannot rule it out.” The Headmaster was grave as he delivered this report. Remus did feel sorry for him for a moment, and then

remembered that he had let Harry stay at that awful place when he knew he was being abused.

Well, the old man had brought this on himself for forcing Harry to stay there. He resisted the urge to glare at him.

He waited as arguments raged back and forth about what they should do. To be frank, there was little they could do. If Harry didn't want to be found, it was unlikely they would find him. Though from what the werewolf could tell, they'd checked the Leaky Cauldron, found nothing and given up. Not exactly the 'leave no stone unturned' approach that the former Professor would have expected in a situation like this. He snorted and decided to speak up.

"Headmaster, have you considered that Harry had enough of the abuse he received at his relatives, and after you refused to let him leave, he took matters into his own hands?" Remus asked, not shouting as he wanted to, but loud enough so the others stopped arguing to listen. Once they had processed what he had said they all stared, stunned. Remus didn't pay them any attention. He was mainly giving into his previous urge and glaring at the man who had lost so much of his respect recently. He knew, as the Headmaster stared back into his eyes that he was probing his mind for information pertaining to Harry's whereabouts. He grinned a little. Let him look – the Vow he had made before he came here tonight would ensure he could not learn anything, not even about Sirius, their marriage and the adoptions. After a few moments Albus looked away.

"Where is he Remus?" He asked quietly. The other's gasped.

"I can't tell you that Albus. I'm sorry. He is safe, though. I can tell you that much." Molly and a lot of the others looked relieved, though Severus just looked more pissed off. Remus heard him mutter 'Typical Golden Boy' but ignored it.

"Can't or won't Remus?" Dumbledore asked, holding up a hand to stop the others interrogating him.

"Both, Headmaster. Harry made me swear an Unbreakable Vow not to tell anyone where he is without his express consent." Remus replied, evoking more shocked sounds from the others. He was

beginning to feel like he was in a muggle pantomime. Merlin help him if anyone called out 'It's behind you!' Seeing the look of defeat on the old wizard's face, Remus pressed on.

"He has decided to make his own decisions Albus. He told me to tell you all that he is safe and happy, living in a lovely home where no one raises their voice or fists to him in anger. He will return to school at the appointed time, but not before, and he is sorry to have caused so much fuss and worry." Harry didn't really want to add that last part, but Belle and Remus had pointed out that it didn't hurt to be diplomatic.

"What's to stop us following you when you leave here Lupin, and finding the brat that way?" Suggested Snape in an evil voice. Remus rolled his eyes at him.

"Nothing Snivellus." Remus pondered over the fact that his marriage, after only a few days, was having quite the effect on him. Some of Sirius's opinions on Snape were filtering through their bond. He turned his attention back to the Potions Master.

"Follow me if you want, but you won't find him. Harry isn't stupid – his location is protected by more than an Unbreakable Vow. That was a last minute thing to stop anyone so dishonest as to try and obtain the information from my mind." The werewolf told him in a calm voice. He saw Dumbledore and Snape shift uncomfortably at his not so subtle reference to their attempts at Legilimency that he had endured for the last five minutes. He got up, deciding there wasn't much more for him to say.

"Now, if there is no more business, I believe I will go and reassure Harry's friends before going home. Albus." He said, nodding to the Headmaster and the others, and leaving the room.

None of them tried to stop him - they all knew it would be pointless.

He found Hermione, Ron and Ginny, sitting in the living room being comforted by the twins. Ron was white, and unusually silent, while the two girls were crying. He noticed Hermione's trunk was next to her and wondered what was going on.

“Oh Professor! Harry is missing!” Hermione said, flinging herself at him and crying into his chest. His heart going out to the girl, he awkwardly patted her back and tried to reassure her.

“Now, Hermione, I’ve not been your Professor for a while now, it’s just Remus, OK? I assure you, Harry is fine. I saw him not half an hour ago.” He said and she stopped crying suddenly and pulled back to stare at him.

“You’ve seen him? You know where he is?” She demanded, her question stopping Ginny’s tears and pulling Ron out of shock.

“Thank Merlin!” Ron declared and Remus chuckled.

“I doubt he had much to do with it! But yes, I’ve seen him, and yes I know where he is, though I can tell you where, I can tell you he is fine, and happy and safe. Though if he hadn’t left the Dursleys when he did I doubt he would have survived the week.” He replied with a frown. Hermione sat down and began dabbing at her face with her tissue, trying to calm her frayed nerves.

“What’s with the trunk Hermione? I thought you were staying here for the summer.” Remus asked, wondering if this was the opportunity to bring her to Harry and their new family home.

“I was going to apparate home; I wanted to be with my parents.” She explained.

“Would you like me to escort you then?” He offered and she considered it.

“Yes, that would be very kind of you.” She replied with a smile. She shrunk her luggage and picked up her cloak for it was a little cool outside. She said goodbye to her friends and took Remus's arm as they walked out of the Noble House of Black. Remus paused as they got a few streets down the road. He quickly checked Hermione for tracking charms and disabled about five. Two of them had been very sneaky and he doubted that most people would have spotted them. It was only due to extensive research into this area of magic that he was even aware those charms existed. He was about to explain to the young witch, but then realised he wouldn’t need to.

“You’re taking me to Harry, aren’t you?” She asked with an excited smile. He nodded.

“Unless your parents are expecting you?” He asked and she shook her head.

“No, they’re out tonight so I was going to go home, have a nice long sleep and a cry, and then fill them in in the morning. Then I was going to ask them to help me start searching.” She told him, with a wry smile. Remus just laughed softly, and held his arm round her to apparate. After a few jumps to disguise their trail, they approached the current Black Family home. All Hermione saw was a neat little cottage up for auction. It was a bit run down but she didn’t pay any notice. It kept flashing up in her mind that it was 'Somebody Else’s Problem', so she didn’t think about it too much. The idea of it being 'Somebody Else’s Problem' did spark a memory though and as she knew Harry’s new house had to be warded, she put two and two together and chuckled.

“Read any Douglas Adams lately Moony?” She asked, using his nickname now that she felt relaxed around him. He smiled lazily and stopped on the pavement on the edge of the wards.

“Hermione Granger, welcome to the new Black Family home.” He said and took her hand to cross the wards. Hermione felt a zing down her spine as she passed through the magical barrier. That was some powerful magic! Even the wards at Hogwarts didn’t feel like that! She didn’t register the reference to the Black Family straight away, she was distracted by the magic and the prospect of seeing Harry, her Harry.

Once they were through she looked up to see a fairly large, muggle looking home. It was reasonably modern, with a nice garden and a car parked on the driveway. They got to the front door and Remus pulled out some keys so they could let themselves in.

“Hi, I’m home! And I brought a visitor!” Remus called out as they came into the hall. Hermione shut the door behind her and listened as what sounded like three pairs of feet clomped down the stairs.

“Moony!” Three distinct voices exclaimed and Remus was assaulted by three blurs rapidly colliding with him and initiating a large group hug.

“Arrgh! You’re squashing me Padfoot!” He declared with mock severity. Hermione exclaimed loudly.

“S-S-Sirius?”

Chapter Eight - Where the Whiskey is Cracked Open

"I think people that have a brother or sister don't realize how lucky they are. Sure, they fight a lot, but to know that there's always somebody there, somebody that's family."

Trey Parker and Matt Stone

Hermione looked in shock and awe at the man they all thought was dead. The man who, in his less guarded moments, Harry admitted that he had mourned everyday for the last two years. She smiled tremulously and threw herself at him, crying her eyes out.

"Thank heavens you're OK." Was all she said. Sirius wrapped his arms round the young woman his son was in love with and patted her back soothingly.

"Good to see you Hermione." He said quietly and she sighed. She turned to Harry and smacked him on the head, and then gave him a big hug too. He warily put his arms around her, returning the hug.

"Um...Hermione? Am I being greeted or reprimanded?" He asked and she lifted her head from where she'd buried in his neck.

"Both." She replied. "This way saves time." She added and tightened her arms a little. Harry smiled and rested his head on hers. Harry suddenly felt incredibly guilty for the worry and anxiety he must have put people through since his disappearance. He would have done it again, given the opportunity – anything to escape Number Four, Privet Drive. But he'd upset his Hermione and he should apologise. He wasn't that insensitive!

"I'm sorry for making you worry about me Hermione." He said contritely.

"So you should be. Don't ever scare me like that again, OK?" She admonished him and he chuckled a little.

“OK. I won’t! Come on, let me introduce you to my new family.” He said with a big grin. Hermione looked curiously at him, wondering if he’d become a little unhinged. She didn’t say anything though; she just patiently followed Harry into the living room of this very muggle looking house. Sirius had settled on the sofa next to Remus, and in an armchair next to them was a dark haired woman, who looked to be a few years younger than her former professor and his mate. She smiled warmly at Hermione and the young witch let out a breath she hadn’t realised she’d been holding. With everything that had happened in the last few days, Hermione was a little jumpy around strangers.

Harry led her eagerly into the room and stopped in front of Remus and Sirius. He stood behind her and reached his arms around her waist, resting his head on her shoulder.

“Well, Hermione, this is my Father, Sirius Black. Next to him is my other Father, Remus Black. On the armchair there, looking pretty, is my Aunite Belle, Remus and Sirius’ sister, Annabelle Black.” Harry said and then he turned her around to face him. “And I’m Harry Black. Everyone, this is Hermione.” Hermione stood stunned, again, as the older people in the room chuckled at Harry’s bizarre introductions. Belle spoke first.

“I think perhaps Hermione should sit down, and then we can give her a proper explanation, hmm?” She suggested and Hermione nodded in gratitude. There was only so much shock a body could stand in twenty four hours.

A large number of whiskey laden cups of tea and a few hours later, Hermione felt she was in possession of all the relevant facts. She couldn’t be happier that these four lost souls had found a family together. In these Dark Times, what little joy that could be found was worth hanging onto. The whiskey in her tea had become necessary at one, heart-stopping moment.

“They hit you Harry? Oh my God! Why didn’t you say something?” Hermione had declared, falling forwards and covering her face with her hands while she wept for her friend. She couldn’t imagine anyone

wanting to hurt him. He was such a gentle, kind person. Sure he was strong and couldn't half pack a punch. But he wouldn't hurt a fly. Harry had held her, and eventually she had calmed. Resolving that she would find some way to pay those muggles back.

Her reaction to Belle's parentage had surprised them though.

"So you weren't born with the name Annabelle? What was it then?" She had asked as they got to Belle's part of the story.

"Aiyana Leonie Riddle. Leonie after my Mother, and Riddle...well I'm sure you can guess." She replied with a grimace. The three men watched warily, uncertain as to the young Gryffindor's reaction. That's when she surprised them. She jumped up out of her chair and flung her arms round Belle.

"Oh, you poor thing! Imagine having 'that' as family. You must have been terribly alone all these years..." She declared and Belle blinked. Then tears started to form in her eyes and she hugged Hermione back.

"I was...for a long time. Then I met someone, and it was wonderful. He understood about families and having to run away from them, his were horrible to him. We were together for a while. But then...he was a Deatheater. I didn't know at first, because you see after Voldemort tried to kill Harry people's Dark Mark's started to fade. I never actually saw it. He carelessly let something slip. I was so scared when I found out, that I ran away...I later discovered that he was working against Voldemort, but by then it was too late. I couldn't go back." She confessed and the others in the room gaped in shock. They could guess who she meant, and this little bit of his history went a long way to explaining why he was such a git.

"So you locked yourself away, hid in the muggle world and never contacted him?" Hermione pressed. She could tell the older woman needed to let this out. Belle shook her head.

"He could be...unforgiving at times. I thought there was a chance he would understand, if he knew who I was. After all, I was young and scared. But I was too cowardly to take the chance, to hold myself up there and risk the rejection. Plus, Albus found out and made it quite

clear I was not welcome in his 'sphere'. I know I should have been brave, but I couldn't...what if he or one of his 'associates' handed me over to Voldemort? My blood, our connection could make him worse than he already is...so I hid. I didn't take sides." She explained in a quiet voice.

"And now?" Hermione asked. A look of resolve and determination formed in the tearstained eyes of the Dark Lord's daughter.

"Now, it's about us. About our family. My Father and Dumbledore can go hang for all I care. This is about us now." She replied. Remus raised his mug in a toast.

"To us!" He declared and the others followed suit.

"To us." They replied.

The five of them were a little tipsy as they made their way upstairs. Harry offered Hermione a guest room but she shyly asked if she could share his room. While he stuttered back a yes, blushing like mad, Sirius stumbled by. He was leaning on Remus, who was giggling and Belle was walking behind them, ready to catch one or both of them in the event of any mishaps.

"No fuzzy bizzis!" Sirius declared as he passed the young couple going into Harry's room. Harry saluted him and chuckled at Belle as she rolled her eyes.

"Come on Dogtanian! Time for beddy-byes!" She said cheerfully and Sirius stumbled.

"Don't call me that Belle!" He managed before he nearly took himself and Remus down.

"Ohhkay lover, lets get you to bed." The werewolf said with a long suffering sigh. As Harry was closing his door he heard the tail end of Remus and Belle's conversation.

"You know it's weird. I haven't had to help a drunken Sirius to bed for years, and yet somehow, when I thought he had died, this is one of

the things I found myself missing.” Remus said, confused. Belle just laughed.

“I can understand that. He is a cute, flopsy sort of drunk.” She replied and they both chuckled.

“Night.” Belle called shutting her door.

“Bight, bight.” Replied Sirius and Remus clucked his tongue at him.

“Night Belle.” He said, closing the door behind himself and his husband. Harry laughed and closed his door finally, and then his breath caught in his chest as he turned and saw Hermione lying on his bed.

Her loud snore told him she was already asleep. He chuckled and sat down next to her. She looked so beautiful, lying there. He ran his hand through her silky, curly hair and sighed contentedly. He waved his wand to change her into something fit to sleep in, and spelled the clothes she had been wearing into a neat pile at the bottom of his bed, along with her shoes. He then got up and changed himself, and after arranging Hermione into a more comfortable position, so she wouldn't wake up the next day with a sore neck, he slid into the bed next to her, and drifted off to sleep.

The next day, various members of the household stumbled into the kitchen sporting varying degrees of hangovers. Since she wasn't a bitch, Belle had prepared several hangover potions for them. Well, she said it was because she wanted to ease their suffering, but it was mainly because she didn't want to listen to their grouching. She chortled at their discomfort as she placed breakfast in front of them, and laughed even more at their answering scowls. They brightened considerably when she placed the potions next to their drinks.

“Belle, dear, you're a lifesaver!” Sirius toasted her with his vial of potion and downed it in one. He was surprised to find it actually tasted good. So was Harry.

“Hey, when Professor Snape makes these, they taste disgusting!” He declared. Belle turned sharply at the mention of the Hogwarts Potions Master.

“Severus Snape? He’s your Professor?” She asked, frowning.

“Yes, didn’t Dumbledore tell you?” Harry asked, digging into his breakfast. He put his knife and fork down as Hermione entered the kitchen and got up to hold his chair out for her. He looked warily at the big beaming grins of his family when he sat down again.

“What?” He demanded.

“Nothing.” All three said at the same time. Hermione greeted them all and asked about what they were discussing before she came in the room. Remus filled her in on the beginning of their conversation about Snape.

“Oh, seems like Professor Dumbledore has been keeping a lot from all of us, over the years.” She said and the others nodded moodily. Hermione couldn’t blame them. It would be a long time before she could forgive the Headmaster for deliberately leaving Harry with the Dursleys when he knew he was being abused. Belle stood by the kitchen counter stirring her tea, thinking about what she’d just learned.

She now knew where he was. Knew what he was doing. He’d always wanted to teach. Oh sure he complained about children, claiming that they were all stupid dunderheads. But he loved to pass on knowledge, help shape a young mind and watch it grow. It was such a shame he was never a Father. Then again, who knew? He might be by now. Her heart twisted at the thought of him with someone else. She knew she was being ridiculous. It had been seven years since she walked out on him.

Walked out without a word.

As much as she tried to justify it, she couldn’t. Sure she’d only been twenty six at the time. But that was more than old enough to be responsible for her decisions. They’d met when she was only twenty one, and had had five great years together. He was her one and only. There was no one before him, and no one after him. Though she

realised she was an idiot for thinking he would have stayed celibate for all these years. Seven years was a long time.

“So, um, does Professor Snape have a family? A...wife or something?” She asked without looking up. The others exchanged shocked glances. Before anyone could speak, Belle carried on, still not looking up.

“I don’t even know why I’m asking. Not like I can do anything about it now, right? Been seven years. Oh, and he deliberately makes his potions taste foul, says it’s a deterrent.” She rambled on. She felt a light touch at her shoulder and turned to be embraced once more by Hermione. The young witch answered her question as she held her.

“I truly don’t know if there is anyone else. There have been no rumours. But he keeps his cards very close to his chest. If there was someone, and I’m only saying ‘if’, then he’s kept them awfully quiet. And to be frank, we’d probably be the last to know. He’s not exactly fans of ours.” She said and Belle nodded slowly.

“Thanks Hermione. Don’t even know why I’m so upset about it. I suppose it’s because I haven’t spoken about any of this, to anyone. Not ever.” She sighed and wiped her eyes, and then blew her nose of a bit of kitchen towel. “Enough. It’s not like I’m going to be seeing him any time soon. So, enough.” She said firmly. The others agreed and turned the topic to something else. They all looked up at a tapping at the window, and groaned as they saw Fawkes. He couldn’t get through the wards apparently.

“Now Belle, dearest. You really should learn not to speak too soon.” Sirius said and she laughed. Remus got up and relieved the phoenix of the message it carried.

“Order meeting. Dumbledore has demanded that ‘All who are currently with Mr Harry Potter are to report to Order HQ immediately.’ He read and tossed the letter onto the table in disgust. Hermione picked it up and read it, frowning.

“We don’t have to go. We’re not with Mr Harry Potter are we? We’re with Mr Harry Black.” Sirius said and Remus frowned at him.

"That's just semantics Siri." He said and Sirius shrugged.

"So what? It's good semantics. All I'm saying is, why should we have to go and leave the safety of our home, just because some old coot deems it so? The middle of the morning isn't exactly the best time for an order meeting." He argued and the others looked thoughtful.

"I for one, am with Sirius. We shouldn't go." Belle said and Hermione looked curiously at her.

"No offence or anything, but is it because of Dumbledore, or is it because Professor Snape will be there?" She asked. The three men looked between the two women and decided to sit this one out.

"Bit of both actually. Firstly, Albus said he would kill me if I ever came near Harry. Secondly, I don't see why we should be at his beck and call. It's not like we're his lackeys! And thirdly, I don't need the emotional upheaval of seeing Severus again. Even if it has been a very long time." Belle replied and Hermione nodded, thoughtfully.

"It's a tough one. Damned if we do, and damned if we don't." Said Harry. Sirius sat forward slightly.

"Surely he can't know about Belle and I?" He asked, and the other turned to look at him.

"I mean sure, it says 'all who are with Mr Harry Potter', but he can't know it's us." He said and they all looked down at the letter again.

"Question is, do we want him to know about you? Are we ready to come 'out' about our new family?" Remus asked and they all considered it.

"I was kind of hoping to have a Dumbledore free summer." Harry said with a rueful grimace. The others chuckled.

"Not bloody likely. He's an interfering old windbag and you're his favourite toy Harry. He's not likely to let you out of his control for long. Now here's the stinker – he knows you don't want to run in his harness anymore, but do we a) let him think you've come round, or b)

ignore him and carry on as we have been?" Belle said. Hermione thought of something.

"Surely he'll know if Harry is pretending?" She asked and Harry smiled. He tapped his forehead with a finger and shook his head.

"Not anymore. One of Belle's books explained Occulemency so clearly that I've managed to master it in no time at all! Like, one afternoon! No way the old coot is getting in my head now. Nor Snape! Or even Mouldy Voldy." Harry said and his family smiled at him. Harry raised his eyebrows and waited for the inevitable request from his lovely Hermione.

"Ooh! That's wonderful Good for you Harry. Can I read? Pleeease?" She asked and Harry chuckled, pleased that she hadn't disappointed him.

"Sure thing." He replied and she blushed as he pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek. The others looked on, smiling indulgently. Sirius stood up and began to pace.

"Right, here's what I think we should do: We'll all go and face the music together. Harry will agree to cooperate with the Order on the condition that he is allowed to live here and that he's not kept in the dark anymore. Dumbledore won't like it, but since we legally adopted each other, he has no choice. He's not Harry's Guardian anymore, I am. And also, I think Hermione will be able to back me up on this, I think the Vows we made together as a family override any Vows we made to the Order?" He asked, looking expectantly at the young witch. She nodded firmly.

"That's right. So he won't be able to order you to give Harry or this location up. But what about me?" She asked, wondering where she would fit in with all this. Surely the Headmaster would have no qualms about stealing the information from her mind?

"Well, you can take the Vows, same as us. They won't be family ones, but they should protect everything you've learned here." Remus suggested and she hastily agreed.

Half an hour later, they were making their way from the park near Grimmauld Place along the road towards Sirius's former family home. They'd driven out of Guildford and parked the car in a Park and Ride car park and then apparated here. This meeting surely had to be about the failure of the tracking charms someone had placed on Hermione. Well, the family had decided to face this head on, and Hermione was honoured to be a part of it. They reached the door and waited with some trepidation, as they waited for someone to answer the door. The house, however, had different ideas, and recognising its owner, the front door swung open unaided.

"Three cheers for the Noble House of Black." Muttered Sirius, and he led them indoors. They all had their hoods pulled up despite the early morning sunshine and they trooped along the hallway towards the back of the house. Hermione could feel the nerves roiling in her stomach.

"Here we go. Ready love?" Harry asked squeezing her hand and she turned to him and smiled, squeezing back. Together they walked in after the three older people, and shut the door behind them.

Chapter Nine – In Which A Few Home Truths Are Told

“Every human being on this earth is born with a tragedy, and it isn't original sin. He's born with the tragedy that he has to grow up. That he has to leave the nest, the security, and go out to do battle. He has to lose everything that is lovely and fight for a new loveliness of his own making, and it's a tragedy. A lot of people don't have the courage to do it.”

Helen Hayes (1900 - 1993)

Hermione, Harry, Sirius, Remus and Annabelle were met by a mixed variety of surprised, worried and angry faces. No one spoke a word and you could have heard a pin drop. Belle shifted her eyes from the angry Headmaster and focused instead on the white face of the Potions Master. He was flabbergasted, but he hid it well. It was only because she'd woken up to that face for five years that she could read it well enough to know how he was feeling. And he wasn't happy. Shock was rapidly giving way fury. She sighed inwardly and looked back at Albus Dumbledore.

“You.” He said with venom in his voice. The people gathered in the kitchen were shocked by his tone, all except the people she'd come with. They'd expected something like this. She made a move to sit down in the chairs left free for them, and her family and Hermione joined her.

“Yes me.” She replied and waited for the explosion.

“I thought I told you to stay away from Harry?” He accused with scorn. Belle didn't flinch.

“True. But did you expect me to listen old man?” She replied nonchalantly. She flicked a quick glance at Severus and could see the grudging respect in his eyes, along with curiosity.

"Yes I did. And I expect you to listen now. Get out! And stay away from us. Stay away from good people like us, and go be with your own kind!" He was starting to get a little pink in the face by now.

"I would calm down if I were you old man. Wouldn't want to give yourself a coronary. As it happens, I am with my own kind." She replied and she looked at Harry and the others.

"Yeah, she is. Be careful what you say to my sister Dumbledore!" Said Sirius, who threw a protective arm around Belle. Remus snarled a little and Harry and Hermione glared at the man they once respected so much. Albus wasn't finished though.

"Oh really? Your sister? Tell me, Miss Riddle, which spell did you use to manipulate them to your own ends? You are so much like your Father." The Headmaster said smugly, feeling as if he'd played a trump card. An audible gasp travelled round the room and some of the others looked at Belle with accusing and hateful expressions. She looked at Severus again, scared at what his reaction would be, and found acceptance. He understood. Or at least, he looked like he did.

"Well, thank you so much for revealing my private business to a room full of strangers Albus. It's nice to know you have so little respect for things told to you in confidence. My family here know about my heritage and they haven't judged me for it. To them, the fact that I abandoned my 'Father' over twenty years ago, and have done nothing to aid his cause, or hurt anyone else deliberately, tells them who I am. And I'm not him. I never was. I am not Aiyana Riddle. I'm Annabelle Black. And believe me when I say if I was like him, you'd be dead by now." She said, fierce resolve evident in her voice. Harry understood why she said it, but he didn't think that that last part helped her case any. He decided to step in.

"We came here today to offer our help, to work with the Order. We are through being manipulated, but if you are all willing to work openly, and honestly with us, then we will do the same with you. However, if you wish to persecute any of us for the pasts and parents we cannot help, then you can all go stuff yourselves." He said, fighting the urge to stick his tongue out and blow a raspberry at them all. Sirius decided it was time for his two pence worth.

“One more thing. Yes, I’m not dead. Thanks for the welcome backs everyone, no really, you’ve been too kind. I guess I can see why none of you were willing to help Moony come search for me. Despite the clues Annabelle left lying around to show I wasn’t dead and being held captive. It really means a lot to me.” He said, noticing the guilty looks of the others and pleased that Snape didn’t even try to look repentant. At least some things didn’t change. He decided to drive his point home. “If you insult my family ever again, you can pack up and get out of my house! Do I make myself clear?” He said in a deadly tone. Remus took his hand to calm him, it wouldn’t do for any of them to let their anger run away with them just now.

The people in the room thought about what they’d just heard. They could see that Harry was fine, but they could also see he wasn’t a child anymore, if he ever was. The five people who’d entered only a few minutes ago were angry and had every reason to be. They all been judged by what they were, and not who they were.

Sirius Black, a scion of one of the darkest pureblooded families. He had been left to rot in Azkaban for a crime he didn’t commit and then later left to rot in captivity with the Death eaters, because no one thought he was worth the risk it would be to go after him. His whole family were Death eaters after all, who could say whether he would turn dark or not in the end?

Remus Lupin, a werewolf. Never mind that he had worked tirelessly for what was right his whole life, he was a Dark Creature. Enough said there.

Annabelle Black or Aiyana Riddle. Daughter of Lord Voldemort. Clearly evil to the core and not to be trusted. Didn’t matter that she had never sided with her father, or ever hurt anyone in her life. She was just made bad.

Hermione Granger, an insufferable know-it-all and a muggleborn. More likely to have her head buried in a book than to even know what time of day it was. And with those muggle relatives, how could she amount to anything? Doesn’t mean anything that she has stood by

her friend's side through thick and thin and saved the lives of many of the students time and time again.

Harry Potter. The-Boy-Who-Lived. Whose only purpose in life was to take down the Dark Lord. Not much more to him than that. Other than that he's the spitting image of James.

Why couldn't these people just fit into the little pigeon holes that had been created for them? Everyone would be much happier if they did. But now they were here and refusing to be controlled. It was too much for most to handle.

"Harry, I must demand that you return to your relative's house immediately! It is not safe for you to stay with these people." Dumbledore declared. The kindly old man persona forgotten in his indignation. They would do as he said, he would make them.

The five of them laughed.

"I don't think you've grasped the situation here Headmaster. I will not return to the Dursleys, ever. I will stay with my family. And my home with them is safer than Privet Drive. After all, even Fawkes could not get through the wards." Harry scoffed at the old man. A few murmurs erupted at this and Harry sat back, suddenly feeling relaxed. He was an adult now. And he had control of his own life.

"So, Potter thinks he knows what's best does he?" Snape decided to join the conversation. Harry took a deep breath. With what he now knew, he could see why the Potions Professor always seemed so angry. His had not been an easy life, and Harry could relate to that. Perhaps the two of them had more in common than either of them had previously thought.

"Actually Professor, it's Black now. Harry Black. And I trust my parents to know what is best for me." He said, indicating Remus and Sirius. Both men held back smug smiles and nasty words. Annabelle had begged them not to pick on Severus ever again. She knew how much it had hurt him in the past and made them promise to be polite. Snape raised his eyebrows, waiting for a taunt from either of the Marauders, and then blinked when it never came. He glanced at

Annabelle and realised she must have said something. He couldn't decide if he was OK with that or not, so he stepped back, resuming his place against the wall. Molly couldn't contain herself.

"Oh, Harry! You changed your name? Why?" She demanded, looking worried. Harry smiled warmly at the Weasley matriarch.

"Because they're my parents, and they adopted me. Apart from Hermione here, we're all Blacks now. Harry, Remus, Sirius and Annabelle Black. We all adopted each other. And maybe one day, someday, Hermione might be a Black as well." He said the last part blushing a little and when he met Hermione's eyes he could see an answering blush. The twins cheered, glad that two of their favourite people seemed to be getting it together after so long.

"Hey Harry! Don't you think -

"- That maybe you two -"

"- are rushing things a little?"

"After all, you've -"

"-Only been friends -"

"- for six years!" They said and Hermione felt like she was watching a tennis match. Harry laughed and nodded to them but didn't say anything. Dumbledore coughed, drawing attention back to himself.

"I'm afraid I cannot allow this adoption to take place. You must have it reversed. Remus and Sirius are not suitable guardians for you." He declared and Harry wondered briefly if the old man was losing his marbles. Remus snarled, the wolf in him raging at the suggestion that he wasn't capable of looking after his cub. Sirius had to hold him down bodily to stop him attacking the Headmaster. Albus just looked as though this behaviour proved his point.

"You know Headmaster, you can get in an awful lot of trouble by provoking a werewolf when you threaten to take away his cub. By law Remus would be well within his rights to dismember you." Hermione

said surprising the others. None of them would ever expect her to speak out against the Professor.

Snape decided that the voice of reason was needed here.

“Albus, there is nothing to be done. Harry has made his choice, and as an adult of seventeen years, he is well within his rights. I think that if Fawkes could not get inside their home then the wards they have set are sufficient. Perhaps this development should be viewed positively. The strength the young man will gain by being with his family could prove invaluable.” He said quietly, and was not surprised when everyone in the room looked at him, dumbfounded.

Apart from Annabelle, that is.

She looked like she expected no less of him, she looked proud. He couldn't help the twist in his heart when she looked at him like that. It had been so long since he'd seen her, he'd forgotten how good it felt to have her shine with pride at something he said or did. He tried to find the anger he'd been holding inside him for so long, thanks to her abandonment of him. But it had disappeared, in fact it had all been redirected to her Father. As soon as Albus had revealed her identity so cruelly, he'd understood why she'd done it. He couldn't blame her for wanting to be as far as possible from anything remotely connected with her Father. Though it looked like she'd changed her mind about that now.

He wondered whether she had changed her mind about him too.

“I assume this meeting was about me and nothing else?” Harry asked, looking round the room. Snape nodded, the others just alternated between glares and worried looks. Harry got up then and his family with him.

“In that case, we'll be off now. Sirius has already agreed that the Order are welcome to continue to use this property as a meeting place. However, if you are not willing to meet our terms then we will not be participating. Molly, if you could inform Ron and Ginny that we will arrange a time to meet up with them if they want to, that would be great. Professor Snape, if I could speak with you a moment?” Harry

hadn't planned on the last part, but something told him it was the right thing to do. Snape nodded again.

"I must protest!" Began Albus, but when five identical glares turned on him, he slumped, defeated. Snape followed them wordlessly from the room and Harry stopped him at the front door.

"If you can promise you will not reveal our location to the Headmaster, you can go without this." Harry said, holding up a blindfold. Very cloak and dagger, and rather melodramatic. But it would be effective.

"I can't promise that Harry." He replied and wondered to himself when he stopped being Potter and became Harry. Probably when he announced that he was no longer Harry Potter. There was no way in hell he was calling him Black.

"I understand Sir. I apologise, but if we could?" He gestured with the blindfold and Severus nodded. He gave it to Belle and she approached, slowly moving towards him. She stopped in front of him and reached up to wrap it round his eyes. It felt so strange to have her this close again. His eyes never left hers until the moment when she pulled the cloth down over them. She took his hand and led him out of the front door. His breath hitched when he felt her wrap her arms around him in preparation to disapparate.

"Are you ready?" She murmured, and he muttered his consent. He felt dizzy for a moment and didn't even hear the pop as they disapparated.

Chapter Ten – Where Enemies Become Friends and Bitterness Ends

“Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul.
And sings the tune
Without the words,
and never stops at all.”

Emily Dickinson (1830 - 1886)

Severus turned his head around trying to find clues as to their location by sound and smell alone. All he could sense was the toxic miasma of petroleum, and the dim constant humming of passing cars. Annabelle slowly removed her arms from around his waist and his stomach flipped in disappointment. It had been so long since anyone had held him, for any reason. He repressed a shiver as she took his large hand in her slightly smaller one, and he took a few uncertain steps as she led him forward. He heard a jangle of keys and then a bleeping noise. Next thing he knew he was being assisted into some kind of vehicle. It had to be a wizarding vehicle though because he didn't think the muggle models included armchairs. He was strapped in and left to contemplate quietly on the thoroughness of this little family's preparation. There was no way he would be able to guess as to the location of their home if they didn't remove his blindfold until he was indoors. By apparating to this automobile and then driving there, there was no way he could track their apparition.

And the most important point was, if he couldn't track it, then neither could the Deatheaters. It seemed the Headmaster was being short sighted in his assessment of this situation, his prejudice against Annabelle was blinding him to the large pros which most definitely outweighed the cons of this arrangement.

That was another thing – Annabelle, his Annabelle was not Annabelle after all, but Aiyana Riddle, the Dark Lord's daughter. He had heard a little about her from Voldemort. He had spoken to the Potions Master just once, of his 'little Yani' as he called her. It was a very awkward

conversation. The Dark Lord had been imbibing, something which he did rarely, if ever, as it let the emotional side, which admittedly was tiny, of the dark wizard out. Which, naturally, he hated, so he rarely drank. But on this occasion he had been drinking heavily, and had asked Severus to stay behind after a routine meeting. It turned out that it was the five year anniversary of the death of his wife Leonie, and their daughter Aiyana. The Dark Lord had killed his wife as he believed the love he felt for her had made him weak. He hadn't planned on doing anything to his child, he had intended to groom her to be his successor in every way, and had even hinted to the Potions Professor that he had wanted them to marry.

Looking back on it now, Severus could appreciate how ironic it was that the two of them had met years later and pursued a relationship for five years. When Annabelle had walked out on him without a word it had taken him a long time to come to terms with it. He had kept rehashing it in his mind trying to work out why she had just up and left like that. He had finally realised it was because she had found out he was a Death eater. He was angry then, that she didn't give him a chance to explain. It was only earlier this morning when Dumbledore had told everyone who she was that he had finally understood. She would have had no way of knowing that he wouldn't discover her identity and use her in some horrible way to revive his 'master'. He could understand fear like that, and though it still hurt, he could forgive her.

He wondered how she felt about him now, and whether, now that she had chosen sides, she would be interested in seeing if they could be with one another again. It was something to ponder. Not like he could do anything about it right this minute.

The sound of a car door shutting woke him from his introspection and he was startled as a gentle hand helped him out of the car. He must have been contemplating for longer than he thought, as it seemed as though they had arrived. He got out of the car and walked forwards, suddenly stopping with a jolt as he encountered a large magical barrier. Someone put a hand on his shoulder.

"Severus Snape, welcome to the new Black Family home." He heard Harry's voice and suddenly he could proceed through the barrier. He

let his magical senses stretch as he passed through it and was surprised to feel such ancient magic at work. This was something similar to the wards around Hogwarts and his own family estate. He wondered where they had learned how to make such warding, as it was thought that the knowledge was lost to all but the Headmasters of the school, and the head of the oldest families. He could hear someone putting a key in the front door and walked awkwardly up the steps into the house.

He sniffed as he entered trying to gain some feel for the property. It smelled like someone's home, he could smell the breakfast that they must have made earlier, and faint signs of chamomile and lavender. He was lead forwards and then right and then someone put their hands on his chest to stop him. Hands reached up and gently removed the blindfold from his eyes. He blinked a few times trying to adjust to the brightness of the warm sunny day, and looked around him.

Black and Lupin were seated on the sofa, smiling at him, which freaked him out a little. No doubt that was their intention. Harry was sat in an armchair, the Granger girl was in his lap, and both were smiling as well. Even stranger. Then he looked down to see Annabelle in front of him, the blindfold in her hands, and a wistful smile on her face. He stared down at her for what felt like an eternity. His body moved of its own volition, his mind not having much say in it, as he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. He rested his head on hers and closed his eyes for a few moments. When he opened them he pulled away from her, but didn't let go, as he beheld her with a look of such tenderness and longing as to make the other people in the room doubt that this was the same man they knew.

"I missed you so." He told her and she smiled, and pulled him back to her.

"I'm so sorry. I missed you too. Please, forgive me..." She whispered the last part. His arms tightened around her.

"You're forgiven, sweet Belle. How about we take this one step at a time, hmm?" He muttered into her hair and she nodded. They both jumped when someone blew their nose rather loudly. They looked

round to see Sirius blowing his nose into a hanky, tears running down his face, while Remus patted him on the back, trying to comfort the blubbing Marauder. Severus smirked, still not letting go of Annabelle.

“You’re getting soft Black.” He accused and all of the Black males turned to him scowling indignantly.

“No I’m not!” Shouted all three of them.

“It’s just so touching.” Sirius added. Severus rolled his eyes as he realised he would now have to call all of them by their first names just to distinguish which one of them he was insulting, or um, speaking to. Annabelle and Hermione just laughed and then suggested they all go out into the garden and enjoy the afternoon, the two women going to the kitchen to make lemonade.

Severus followed the three men who all discarded their heavy robes revealing loose linen summer clothing which would make them much more comfortable in the heat of the August morning. Snape did the same, pleased for once not to be wearing his heavy teaching robes. Here in this house, he could safely drop the guise of the greasy git and just be a man. He listened quietly as the three men discussed the merits of having a day of barbecuing and swimming, Harry claiming that after the morning they’d had that they all deserved a day off from training. Severus’ ears pricked when Harry mentioned training and Remus noticed. He began to explain as the two women came outside carrying a tray laden with jugs of lemonade and glasses filled with ice.

Severus swallowed when he saw Annabelle had changed into a lovely pale yellow sundress. Hermione was similarly garbed and he noticed where young Harry’s eyes were, and that he wasn’t paying any attention to the conversation that was going on around him. Neither was Severus and Remus chuckled when he noticed that too.

“So, and yeah, we keep a pink elephant in the shed, you know, just for parties and the like.” He said and everyone laughed when Harry and Severus just nodded and said, “Yeah, sounds good.” When they realised the others were laughing at them, they turned almost identical scowls on their friends which only made them laugh even harder. When he realised he had regained the Potions Master’s attention, Remus explained how they were training Harry to defend

himself slowly, since he was still healing from his treatment at the Dursleys.

“What was strange though, was that Belle here detected a binding on his magic which we haven’t been able to remove. We think it is what is stopping his magic from developing completely. And Belle also thinks it is what is causing him to be so bad at Potions, among other things.” Remus said and Severus raised his eyebrows.

“Really? Are you sure it isn’t because he’s just simply atrocious at them? After all it takes a lot of time and patience. Neither of which Potter posses.” He said with a ghost of his usual sneer. He jumped when Belle smacked him on the arm.

“Don’t be mean! Harry is not stupid, and what’s more, he’s a wonderful cook. It doesn’t make sense that he should so routinely ruin Potions, when he never spoils dinner. You know very well that Potions needs calm and most of all magical balance in the brewer. The binding had thrown his magic into flux, and it is neither calm nor balanced. That is why he’s, and forgive me Harry, so abysmally awful at Potions. It’s a miracle he made it into your NEWT’s class.” She told him and he considered it. The binding could explain a lot. He knew from the young man’s essays that he wasn’t an idiot.

“I could help you know, there is a potion that would reveal who bound his powers and what type of binding was used. It should aid you in removing the binding. It won’t take long to brew if you have the ingredients.” He offered. He had his suspicions on who had bound the young man’s powers, but he would wait until they had firm proof. Despite the meeting earlier that morning, he knew Albus wasn’t a bad person, he was just getting old. His reasoning was off, but he wasn’t acting out any malicious intent. It happened to the best of them, unfortunately.

“Thank you Professor. I really appreciate your help in this. I know we haven’t ever got on that well, but I know everything you’ve done for me over the years, and I’m very grateful.” Harry said, offering his hand to the spy. Severus shook it, wondering what he had just started. He went with Belle into the house to check out the ingredients she had.

The others left in the garden talked quietly, enjoying the peace of the summer day. Before long, Sirius just had to ask a question he'd been holding in since the night before.

"So, Harry my boy, are you and this lovely young woman officially an item, or what?" He asked beaming. Both young people had the good grace to blush and nodded.

"Hoorah!" Sirius cheered and Remus offered them less exuberant yet no less heartfelt congratulations. The young couple went on to describe how they'd awoken that morning, entwined in each other's arms.

Hermione had felt a soft kiss on her temple, and warm arms encircling her waist from behind and she smiled, remembering where she was and who she was with. Harry had turned her round and looked down with a question in his eyes. She nodded slightly and he smiled nervously and bent his head to hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck as she felt him deepen the kiss and massaged her tongue with his. To her it had been special and perfect, and unabashedly sweet. To him it was gentle and wonderful, and she was everything he'd ever wanted.

Apparently neither of them believed the other would think of them as more than a good friend. Harry had believed she thought him to reckless and arrogant while she believed he thought her to bookish and bushy haired. Both had vehemently assured the other that this was not the case, and Harry had presented Hermione with a very thoughtful gift. He'd asked Belle for her help and they had gone out and got the young witch a beautiful leather bound diary with her initials embossed on the cover. Harry had written a message inside for her, which she made much of and showed the two Marauders.

My Beautiful Hermione,

Here is a book full of blank pages for you to fill with your wonderful and special thoughts. I will never be able to sufficiently express just how much I admire and respect you. You are beautiful, brave,

intelligent, funny and kind, and a million other things too. I am glad everyday that you wish me in your life. If not for you, I don't think I would be here right now. You have saved my life and many others so many times, with your cool logic and reasoning, which can sometimes belie the passionate and romantic soul underneath the smart exterior. You will always have all of me.

All my love,

Harry.

Hermione had been so happy when she read what he had written and she hugged the diary to her chest for a few seconds before flinging her arms around the nervous young Gryffindor and hugging the living daylights out of him. But that wasn't all, he had another gift up his sleeve. This time a beautiful fountain pen, engraved with her name and also something that made her heart skip a beat. Turning it in the light she read the inscription:

"A room without books is like a body without a soul."

Cicero (106 BC - 43 BC)

When she read it, she flung her arms around him again making him chuckle, and he got up and swung her around the room while she giggled. When they finally sat down, she took out the pen and looked at it again.

"You really do understand." She had said softly and he nodded. She was so touched, she had never thought anyone had understood her deep and abiding love of books. But she'd obviously been wrong, Harry had just proven that.

When told about all of this, Sirius had just blubbed again, and Remus had laughed at him, along with the young lovers, and the four of them went back to discussing the binding of Harry's magic. It seemed as though they had the same suspicions as Professor Snape.

"I think we have to consider the possibility that the Headmaster, if he was the one to do it, did believe he was acting in your best interests Harry. However misguided we think he is, he isn't evil." Remus said and the other three considered it. Sirius just snorted and Hermione looked thoughtful. Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair, making it look messier than normal.

"I know he's not, deep down. But, they were hurting me Remus, and he just left me there. If Sirius and Belle hadn't shown up when they did..." Harry didn't finish his sentence, and no one needed him to. They all knew what he meant; if they hadn't rescued him when they did, he could be dead or worse. They all stared down at the wooden table they were sitting around, suddenly subdued.

They were startled out of their respective reveries when they heard the unmistakable sound of the greasy Hogwarts Potions Professor laughing heartily. He and Belle walked back out into the garden in hysterics. Snape seemed to be reciting something, and had put on a funny voice.

"E's not pinin'! 'E's passed on! This parrot is no more! He has ceased to be! 'E's expired and gone to meet 'is maker! 'E's a stiff! Bereft of life, 'e rests in peace! If you hadn't nailed 'im to the perch 'e'd be pushing up the daisies! 'Is metabolic processes are now 'istory! 'E's off the twig! 'E's kicked the bucket, 'e's shuffled off 'is mortal coil, run down the curtain and joined the bleedin' choir invisible! THIS IS AN EX-PARROT!" Severus shouted the last part and Belle stumbled, she was laughing so hard.

"Oops, watch it there Belle!" Severus said, snickering as he caught her. "Wouldn't want you to do yourself any permanent injuries." He said and she chortled again.

"What would it say on the report? 'Death by Monty Python?" She said and he chuckled again. Hermione then worked out what they were going on about, and then started to laugh too. The others having no acquaintance with Monty Python just looked at them like they'd all announced they were in fact poisonous fish monkeys from Mars and that they had better be getting back to their spaceship.

Or something equally bizarre and scary. Severus noticed the three men staring at them and frowned a little.

“What? Can’t a nasty Deatheater turned spy appreciate one of the funniest sketches in the history of British Comedy? Hmm? No? No idea what I’m going on about then?” He said looking at the three blank faces. “Oh well, your loss!” He said and he reclaimed his seat and drink from earlier. Belle had managed to compose herself by now, and sat next to him, scooting her chair a little closer.

“Well anyway, we have the ingredients necessary and Severus has kindly agreed to stay and brew the potion. He’s asked if Miss Granger would be willing to assist?” She told them and Hermione nodded eagerly.

Sirius looked at the odd group gathered around him. In such a short space of time, he had what he’d always wanted. And the same went for the others. Out of the six of them, only Hermione had had a loving home with loving parents. But because they weren’t magical, there was only so much of her life that they could be involved in. They couldn’t advise her on magical matters, and up until now she’d had to work things out for herself. It couldn’t have been easy, trying to find your own way in a world you knew nothing about, having been thrust into it at the tender age of eleven. As for the others, none of them had come from happy homes. He had been feeling sentimental and weepy all day, but when he looked around this table, he felt like blubbing again. This house, this family, was their refuge. And in the storm which approached, they would all help each other steer themselves safely into the harbour.

For just right now, life was good.

Chapter Eleven – Where Tricks are Uncovered

“He felt that his whole life was some kind of dream and he sometimes wondered whose it was and whether they were enjoying it.”

Douglas Adams (1952 - 2001), *"The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy"*

“There, it’s done.” Severus declared, pleased with his success.

“Say, wha?” Mumbled Sirius who had been dozing in a nearby armchair. Remus was in his lap, fast asleep. Harry and Hermione were curled up on the sofa, also asleep. He and Belle were the only alert ones. What had started out as a simple brew had fast turned rather complex when the initial potion revealed the level of binding on Harry’s magic. It had also shown them all who had placed the binding on the young man: Albus Dumbledore.

No one had been very surprised.

In fact when the paper appeared in Severus’s hand after Harry had taken the potion, and he read out the name, the whole thing had felt rather anticlimactic. The amount of power that had actually been bound by the Headmaster was astonishing, especially given how powerful Harry already was. None of them had thought twice though and Belle and Severus had begun the potion to aid in removing the binding immediately.

That had been about six hours ago.

Now, finally, it was done. A simple spell and the hideously complex potion would release the young man’s dormant powers. He would soon be a force to be reckoned with indeed. He would also need extra training to regain control of his magic, which given the boost he was about to receive, could easily spiral out of control.

"I think it would be best if we do this tonight, so he can sleep through most of the unravelling. It will make the process go faster if he is relaxed." Snape advised. Sirius nodded and Belle went over to Harry and knelt down. She gently shook his shoulder until he grumbled in his sleep and tried to slap her hand away. She chuckled low and pinched his nose. After a few seconds Harry sat bolt upright and flapped his hands in front of his face trying to fight off his supposed attacker. He looked ridiculous and the others laughed at him. Hermione stirred a little and groaned as Harry turned in his seat, rubbing his eyes.

"Not funny Belle." He declared yawning. He stretched a little and then slouched back into the sofa, manoeuvring Hermione until her head was resting in his lap. She squirmed a little, getting comfortable and then went back to sleep. "Whassup?" Harry asked, stifling another yawn.

"The potion is ready Potter. We should do this now, before you go to bed, so that you can sleep through the process. To aid this we have purposely brewed the potion to make you drowsy. It won't work like Dreamless Sleep though, just in case you have any nightmares or visions. We wouldn't want you to get trapped in them and not be able to wake." Snape explained, slipping into Professor Mode. Harry arched an eyebrow at the use of his former last name and tsked at the Hogwarts Professor.

"It's Black now Professor. Please do try and remember that the next time you want to be a snarky git." Harry replied, strangely pleased that the dreaded Potions Teacher hadn't lost his edge in all the sappiness he'd been exposed to in the last twelve hours. Snape looked like he was going to snap back but then he chuckled darkly.

"Point taken Mr Black." He replied emphasising the name. Belle just rolled her eyes at the two men, not sure if she wanted to scold them or not. She decided not to.

"Anyway, back to business. Now, we'll set up a charm in your room so that either Severus or myself will be awakened should anything happen, but Hermione will not be able to share a room with you. It's only a precaution but we wouldn't want your raw magic to lash out at

her in any way.” Belle said and Harry tightened his arms around his new girlfriend a little, slightly put out at the suggestion that he could ever hurt Hermione. He knew he was being irrational but he was a just a tad tired right then. Then something occurred to him.

“It’s weird, but since staying here, I haven’t had any nightmares or visions. And my scar hasn’t hurt at all.” He told them, frowning a little as he considered it. He looked at his Professor.

“Sir, have there been any meetings in the last few days?” He asked. Severus nodded.

“Yes, there was one last night. I believe some of the Deatheaters went on a raid the night before that and were punished as it went wrong. The inhabitants of the village they attacked weren’t quite as helpless as the Dark Lord had been led to believe and they fought back admirably. The Deatheaters were forced to retreat. Some of the punishments were rather...severe. He was always fond of the Cruciatus Curse.” He said the last with a shudder, remembering what little he had witnessed. Belle looked bleakly at him for a few seconds and then got up to excuse herself. Severus watched her go, and wondered how his words had caused such an effect in her. He shrugged it off for the moment and looked back to Harry.

“Well, that’s weird. I didn’t see anything, nothing at all.” The young Gryffindor said as he absently ran his fingers over that famous scar.

“Maybe it’s the wards. They are very ancient magic and very thorough. Perhaps the new family link, coupled with the wards and your new mastery of Occlumency is keeping him out.” Remus theorised from Sirius’s lap. The sound of voices had woken him a few minutes before. He looked at Sirius who shrugged, clearly not able to think of any explanation. Hermione, who had awoken too, sat and puzzled over it.

“Well, it could be a combination of factors: the new family bond, the wards linked to the family bond, Harry now being a Master Occlumens. Or could it be that Harry is now linked by blood to Voldemort’s daughter? Perhaps the familial connection is disrupting it in some way?” She suggested still puzzling over it. She chewed her bottom lip.

"It's impossible to know for sure, and there is very little research we can do, as there has never been a precedent for this. No one has survived the Killing Curse before." Snape said and they all nodded absently.

"So there is no way to know if I'll still be able to escape the visions when I return to school. We already know the wards there won't keep him out." Harry said a little glumly. Everyone shook their heads, gloom seeming to seep into all of them.

"I don't want to hear any more of this depressive talk. This is what he wants you to feel! Don't you see? And anyway, chances are, once Harry removes the binding his full powers will allow him to sever the connection to that bastard!" Belle declared forcefully. The others swung to look at her in shock as they hadn't heard her re-enter the room. She looked tired and a little green, but otherwise OK.

"Are you alright Belle?" Sirius asked, but she waved the question away.

"I'm fine. It's not important. Right then. It's really late; we had best get down to business." She said firmly and they all complied.

About thirty minutes later, Harry was tucked up soundly in bed, having consumed the potion and Remus having cast the spell required to work in conjunction with the potion. Severus had cast a monitoring charm over him that would alert any and all of the adults should the young man need help. They were just going to use Snape and Belle but decided it wouldn't hurt for everyone to be on call.

Belle was fast running out of places for people to sleep, for despite her muggle riches she hadn't splashed out on a huge mansion. The house had four bedrooms, one of which had been converted into Belle's study. Remus and Sirius occupied the largest guest room, while Harry was in the next one down from that. She'd placed Hermione on the futon in her study, while she intended to give up her bedroom for Severus. They were currently having a quiet row about these arrangements.

“For pity’s sake woman! Just go sleep in your own bed and I’ll sleep on the sofa!” Snape ordered wearily. Belle just scowled at him.

“Listen Snape! While you are under my roof you will obey my rules? Clear?” She said and he bristled with anger.

“Why you...” He began but was cut off by a bright flash and a distant roll of thunder. Belle heard it too and let out a small ‘Eeep!’ of surprise and looked around worriedly. Severus was about to continue their argument when there was another flash and a few seconds later a louder thunderclap rolled through the skies. Belle bit her lip and started wringing her hands. Snape wondered at her for a moment and then remembered.

She was petrified of thunderstorms.

During the years in which they’d co-habited whenever there was a storm he would wake up to find her clinging onto him for dear life. At first he’d thought it was funny, after all, it was a silly thing to be afraid of. But then he’d felt sympathetic when he found out it was a full on phobia that had and could cause her very distressing panic attacks. She’d tried hundreds of treatments, both muggle and wizarding alike, but none of them seemed to work. The nights of storms where he was away from home, he would come back to find her curled up in a tight ball on the living room sofa, having cried herself into an exhausted sleep. The only thing that seemed to help her was being held. He felt a twist in his chest as he wondered how she’d coped alone for the last seven years.

“Heh heh heh heh...” She muttered intelligibly as she wrapped her arms around herself and jumped at the next flash of lighting. She slapped her hands over her ears as the next round of the thunder cracked through air. The storm was getting closer. Without a word, Severus picked up the now shivering woman and carried her into her bedroom. Once he’d directed her into the bathroom to change her clothes and whatnot, he waved his wand to take care of himself and waited for her to return. When she was back he tucked her into bed and after using the bathroom himself he slid into bed next to her and wrapped his arms around her. She automatically snuggled back into the familiar embrace and sighed.

"Thanks Severus." She said quietly and he smiled.

"Anytime Belle." He paused for a moment. "Where did you disappear to earlier?" He asked and he felt the slight shudder that passed through her body. He tightened his arms a little and she sighed again.

"It was just, your mention of the torture, the Cruciatus – when he killed Mother I was so angry I ran at him and started slapping him. He'd made me watch while he used that curse on her and then when he fired the Killing Curse at her I just lost it. I think he was surprised at first. Then he recovered and threw me off him. I hit the wall and then he screamed at me. '*You will learn your place Aiyana!*' He screeched and then he hit me with the Cruciatus Curse. He – it really is his favourite. He didn't hold it for long; he didn't want to damage his Dark Heir. I couldn't move at first, but somehow, and to this day I don't know how, I managed to get up and flee." She stopped talking for the moment and took a few deep breaths. Severus didn't say anything, he was just in shock.

Oh, he knew the Dark Lord was all evil. He wasn't stupid. But he could not believe that he would use that curse on his 'Little Yani'. After all she would have been what? Ten? He never thought anyone could be that heartless. Then again, Voldemort wasn't the only who had a penchant for that kind of punishment on their child. His own godson had suffered under that curse from his Father's wand more times than Severus wanted to remember. And each time he berated himself for not being able to spare Draco the pain. Belle started speaking again.

"The discussion earlier, it just caused a flashback. I had to go and be sick. I'd forgotten about most of that night until now. Blocked it away. As much as it pains me to remember, it does serve to remind me of why I should've taken sides in this fight, long ago." She said and Snape took a deep breath. Outside the storm continued to tear through the night sky.

"We will win Belle, of that you can be sure. Now, less chatter, more sleep. Goodnight." He rumbled in his deep velvety voice, its timbre washing over the woman in his arms and soothing her. Belle laughed a little.

“Yes sir. Goodnight.” She replied and closed her eyes. Losing herself in the comfort of the arms she’d missed so much. For the first time in her life, she was glad of the thunderstorm raging outside.

Chapter Twelve – In Which a Cry for Help is Heard

“No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.”

Aesop (620 BC - 560 BC), *The Lion and the Mouse*

Harry awoke to find a strange feeling suffusing his limbs. He felt – lighter. As if some kind of strain had been pulling on him and now it had let go. He was reminded of muggle cartoons where a coyote would be trying to run away, only to find himself attached to some elastic and then snapped back to his original starting point. He'd always felt he was pushing or pulling against something. Whenever he did spells he felt as if he had to wrestle with his magic and physically force it to do something. He turned to his bedside table and looked for his glasses. They weren't there. He looked around, puzzled, but everything was a blur. Then he remembered, the night before, the potion had knocked him out pretty quickly and Belle had put him to bed.

“*Accio* glasses!” He called holding up his hand. He heard a whizzing and then his glasses smacked him in the face, along with some shoes, robes, socks, his book bag, and a chair which crashed into the footboard of his bed. The wardrobe rattled a little and Harry looked a little nervously at it until it stopped.

Well, that had never happened before.

Surely a little wandless Summoning Charm shouldn't be able to do all that? Though the Professor did mention that his magic would be unbalanced. Maybe he shouldn't have cast that charm. He settled back guiltily into his bed as the cavalry arrived.

“Harry! Is everything alright?”

“Why is that chair in pieces on the floor?”

“What's been happening in here?”

“What’s going on?”

“Is Harry alright?” The last was from Hermione and Harry smiled sheepishly at the five people gathered in the doorway. He put his glasses on and waved.

“Er, hi guys! I, um, summoned my glasses.” He explained and waited for the telling off. He didn’t have to wait long.

“Harry! How could you be so careless? You knew your magic would be unbalanced this morning! You could have hurt yourself!” Hermione got in first and stomped over to him, hands on her hips. Harry knew she was fighting the urge to shake a finger at him. He sat up and silenced her with a kiss – he couldn’t help it – she just looked too damn cute when she was cross!

“Ummph! Don’t think you’re getting out of this that easily!” She declared when he released her, though he did notice the expression on her face had softened immeasurably and she seemed to have run out of steam. He looked to the others who were still milling near the door and laughed a little at their expressions.

Sirius looked liked he wanted to give him the thumbs up for using the best method of escaping a scolding. Remus looked torn between laughter and worry. Belle was trying to hide a smile and Snape was showing his complete and utter contempt and amusement at the situation unabashedly. Harry was a little surprised at the Potions Master’s reaction, but then he was also surprised to see the older man in pyjama bottoms and a t-shirt, his arm around Belle.

‘No need to guess where he spent the night then!’ Harry thought.

“Well then, crisis averted. Considering young Mr Black’s history, we should be glad it was a false alarm.” Snape said silkily and Harry laughed aloud at this.

“Makes a change, doesn’t it Snape?” Harry said and the Potions Master inclined his head. Belle shook herself.

“Come on then everyone. I’ll get ready and then go and make some breakfast.” She offered and was greeted with cheerful exclamations.

Hermione stayed put for a while and waited for the others to leave. She smacked Harry gently on the arm.

“Hey...” He protested but was cut off by an urgent kiss. After a few moments, Hermione pulled away.

“Don’t ever do anything that foolish again Harry! You must try to understand, you have more than just yourself now. You have a family, you have me. When you make rash decisions like that, it affects all of us, OK?” She told him and he nodded, the truth of her words slowly sinking in.

“It’s just that...I’ve been alone for so long, that I never stop to think...” He said, swallowing a little as the possible consequences of his actions now passed before his eyes.

“I know. It’s just going to take a little getting used to, right?” Hermione suggested and he nodded.

“Right.” He agreed with a smile. Hermione pulled him up and out of bed.

“Time to get up lazy bones! We’ve got a lot of work to do today!” She said brightly. Harry just groaned, muttering under his breath about ‘morning people’.

When Harry and Hermione finally made it downstairs it was to hear Annabelle and Remus having a rather bizarre argument about pets. Despite taking Sirius in when she thought he was a dog it seemed Belle was more of a cat person.

“Oh, no, but cats are much cooler than dogs!” Belle was saying and Sirius was scoffing, crossing his arms in a doggy huff.

“They are!” She insisted, she went on. “Cats have a scam going. You buy them food, they eat the food, they go away. That’s what they do. You have no control of your cat! You can’t say to your cat, ‘*Cat, heel! Stay! Wait! Lie down! Roll over!*’ ‘Cause the cat’ll just be sitting there going ‘*Interesting words. Have you finished?*’ And while you’re shouting this at your cat, your dog’s right next to you going...” And

she started miming the dog following the commands. Remus was chortling at her and Sirius was trying not to give up his offended pose. Even Snape was having trouble holding onto his haughty demeanour. Belle wasn't finished though it seemed. She waved hi as the two young students sat down at the table and started getting their breakfast.

"And you're like, '*What the hell are you doing? I'm talking to the cat.*' And the dog's like, '*Oh sorry.*' You wouldn't even dream of training your cat. You'd be there all, '*Cat's come for training. Now stay...Hello? Hello?*' They just don't care, they just piss off." She said smiling and taking a sip of her orange juice. Sirius had given in and was laughing with Remus. Snape was chuckling quietly in his seat next to Belle, slowly drinking his coffee. Belle turned to Harry and Hermione.

"Good Morning you two. Sorry I didn't say hello straight away, I was just trying to prove a point." She said and got up to get a fresh carton of orange juice from the fridge as the one on the table was empty. Severus snorted.

"And what exactly was your point Annabelle?" He said raising an eyebrow at her as she sat down again. She ignored him for a moment while she refilled her glass.

"I don't know Professor Snape. Perhaps I shall ask Severus when he returns. Or maybe you could ask him for me." They all looked at her confused. Snape even let out a 'Humph!'

"Point taken." He said and raised his mug to her. Harry then realised what she had meant. It was very true. He really did seem to be two people. One was Professor Snape, the person who had been a complete arsehole to Harry for the last six years. And the other was Severus Snape. The one who had been his Auntie Belle's lover for five years, whom Harry did not know at all. All in all it was rather unsettling, and not a little bit scary.

"Now Harry, we'll need to start training right away so you can take control of your new magical strength. We'll need to test the scope of your magic now it has been released and check to see if there are

any other bindings which were concealed by the first.” Remus explained and Harry gasped in surprise.

“Is that possible?” He asked and the werewolf nodded.

“Absolutely. Though, I admit it is unlikely. The five of us will train together.” He said indicating himself, Sirius, Belle, Hermione and Harry of course. Harry looked at Professor Snape, the question clearly evident on his face. The spy put his coffee cup down.

“I must return to Hogwarts.” Harry could see Belle stiffen a little as Snape made this announcement. “No doubt Albus will have many questions for me when I arrive. For that reason I wish to enter into an Unbreakable Vow not to reveal anything I have learned here.” He said quietly and Harry’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline in surprise. He wasn’t the only one either.

“Wow! Well, Professor. I mean, that’s so...decent of you.” Hermione said ruefully. Snape laughed again and smiled at her.

“Rather shocking isn’t it? Before I go, I would like to make a request. None of you are going to like it though.” He said and Sirius huffed.

“Knew there’d be a catch! What’s your price then Snivellus? How much for your silence?” He asked, his mouth twisting cruelly. He received several smacks to the head from the people round the table. Belle noticed Severus flinch at the horrible taunt and placed a comforting hand on his. He immediately gripped it and threaded their fingers together, needing the comfort she was offering. She turned to her brother.

“Sirius Black! Don’t you EVER let me hear you say anything like that again! How dare you treat Severus that way? He has risked a great deal by trusting us, and coming here to help us. You apologise right now, or you’ll be eating boiled tripe for dinner for the next month!” She yelled and even Snape cowered a little at her wrath. Sirius’s eyes flared indignantly for a moment and then he relented.

“I’m sorry Severus. I don’t know what came over me. I’m being a childish prat, as usual.” He said offering his hand to the Potions Professor. Severus eyed it suspiciously for a moment and then

grasped it with his right hand, shaking it firmly. Belle squeezed his left hand in approval but didn't let go. Severus didn't let go either, he was grateful for the soothing contact.

"I do not ask for an exchange, my silence is guaranteed either way. All I ask, is that you consider my request: My godson, Draco, is in grave danger. His Father is in Azkaban as you know and as many don't know, his mother is a Marked Deatheater too. He does not wish to join the Dark Lord's ranks, neither do some of his friends. They too are in danger for this reason. If I can somehow get them to you – we don't have to meet here. The apparating to a car park and then driving here was an excellent idea by the way. As I was saying, if I can get them to you, would you take them in? Protect them? Their parents plan to force them to be Marked and Initiated in a week's time." Snape said, a great sadness showing in his eyes.

Harry and the others were blown away.

They none of them wished anyone to be forced to serve the Dark Lord. They all knew what the forced Marking and Initiation would do to the young Hogwarts students. Harry looked around at the faces of his family and really considered it.

"I don't know about you guys, but I don't see that we have a choice. I will not let anyone suffer though forced subservience to that bastard if I can help it! I know what it feels like to be Marked, thanks to my visions. I also know what other things they will have to endure. I say we do it. We have to." He declared firmly and he noticed that Belle and Hermione were nodding, along with Remus and Severus. Sirius looked torn.

"Harry, I want to help them escape their families. After all, I know what they're going through! I've been there too. But surely Dumbledore..." He began but Snape cut him off.

"I've already spoken with Albus and he says that though their fate is regrettable, it can't be helped. He claims not to have the time or the manpower to assist them." Snape said with a sneer. He knew what Dumbledore really meant – his Slytherins weren't worth the trouble it would take to save them.

"It always comes back to one of them, doesn't it? Voldemort or Dumbledore? All of us 'little people' are caught between the two of them as they have their game of Tug of War. Both of them have written the Slytherins off because of their families. The same way they have done to all of us. People will never judge us on our own merit, they will never be able to see past our names." He looked round the table at the people gathered there. "Severus Snape will always be the greasy git who terrifies students – not the caring Professor who is trying to spare his godson the ordeal he suffered himself as a young man. Aiyana Riddle would never be able to get free of the taint of her Father, after all, with Voldemort's blood flowing in her veins, she just has to be evil? And Draco Malfoy will always be a nasty bastard that isn't worth saving, because won't he just turn out to be just like his Dad in the end?" Harry spat. The others were taken aback at his impassioned words but were fired with indignation when the truth of them sank in.

"And Harry Potter will always be The-Boy-Who-Lived who had his powers bound by the saintly Albus Dumbledore so he could be controlled and trained into the ultimate weapon." Snape added quietly. Harry nodded in acknowledgement. He privately suspected that Dumbledore had bound his magic so that he would not end up like Tom Riddle – too powerful. The Headmaster was short sighted indeed, as he didn't see that this kind of deception and manipulation is what could turn an awful lot of people bad. He wouldn't be surprised if it had been a contributing factor in Tom's turning into Voldemort.

"I agree with Harry. We should take them in. Just how many are we talking about Severus? We'll need to cast a few spells on the house to accommodate everyone." Belle said.

"Four: Draco Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson, Blaise Zabini and Theodore Nott. They are the ones in danger. The others in that year, are, I'm afraid, lost to us already. They are willingly going to be Marked. I doubt they will return to Hogwarts in the Autumn, their parents mentioned something about Durmstrang." Snape replied and the people at the table nodded. Belle squeezed his hand again and he inwardly sighed with relief.

When those four students approached him separately they had been desperate. They knew he was a Deatheater and they took a great risk in revealing their fears to him. Of course it was done in such a way that only after mutual assurances of silence, they confessed all and asked him to rescue them from what they considered to be a fate worse than death. He'd gone to see the Headmaster immediately, confident that he would know what to do to help. Only to be astounded and furious when the old man refused help and forbade him to relinquish his position as a spy in order to save them.

'The lives of four students do not outweigh the needs of the many Severus.' He'd said.

Sanctimonious old codger.

Severus had begun to despair of finding a solution and Draco and the others had started to become resigned to their fate, bleak despair evident in their eyes whenever he saw them. It was heartbreaking. He was worried that one of them might do themselves an injury, just to get away. Well, now they didn't have to worry. He couldn't wait to give them the good news.

"Are we agreed then everyone?" Asked Sirius and they all nodded. "Yes." Was then unanimous decision.

"How soon can you get them here?" Asked Remus.

Draco Malfoy sat in the window seat of his room at Malfoy Manor and tried not to dwell on his fate. He was starting to lose hope that his godfather could find him a way out of this. When his Father had been sentenced to Azkaban, he outwardly raged about the injustice. Inside though, he gave extravagant thanks to whichever deity had granted him this reprieve.

It was short lived however when his Mother informed him of his imminent initiation into the ranks of the Deatheaters. Sure, Draco was proud of his heritage and he shared some of his family's ideals, but his was essentially a gentle soul. He had a talent for healing which led to the kindness of nature he had been repressing inside himself for as long as he could remember. He wasn't a saint by any stretch of

the imagination. He did rather enjoy annoying Potter, and he was a bit of a man-whore. But he wasn't evil, not even a little bit.

His head turned as he heard tapping at the window pane and jumped up as he recognised his godfather's personal owl. It was the one he used when communicating with Draco's Father so it wouldn't be out of place here at the Manor. Draco let it in and hurried to get it a treat. That done he hastily grabbed the letter and opened it.

Dragon,

Meet me in a private room at the Leaky Cauldron today at two o'clock. The landlord will direct you. Tell your Mother you are meeting Pansy for ice cream and that you will be buying your school supplies. Your Hogwarts letter should have arrived by now. Remember that a prudent man is always ready for any eventuality.

Regards,

Severus.

Draco clutched the letter to his chest for a moment as his breathing hitched. Then he threw it into the fire and watched it burn. This was it – Severus had found a way for him to escape. He wondered where he would be going. There was still a good few weeks before school started again – Hogwarts would be deserted. He didn't care though; this was his chance to be free! He jumped up and composed himself ready to go and ask Mother for permission to Floo to Diagon Alley.

Chapter Thirteen – In Which Some Lost Souls Find Refuge

"The universe is change; our life is what our thoughts make it."

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (121 AD - 180 AD), *Meditations*

Draco made his way into the Leaky Cauldron, his shrunken trunk containing all his essentials and the things he could not bear to leave behind. Who knew if he could ever go back? His Mother hadn't suspected a thing, and had swanned off an hour ago for a Spa Day with her bird brained friends. The landlord caught his eye, before turning to the barmaid next to him.

"I must remember to repair the shutters in Room Two, Maud." Was all he said. Draco didn't even acknowledge him, he just made his way upstairs. There weren't many patrons around, and what little there were saw nothing but a wizard in a cloak making his way silently towards the private rooms in the Leaky Cauldron. Nothing unusual there.

When he reached the room, Draco opened the door slowly and breathed a sigh of relief as he saw who was in there. He was taking a leap of faith by meeting them all here, as were the rest of them. He wondered briefly to himself when they would begin to trust anyone again, if they ever did. He closed the door behind him and took his place at the table next to Pansy. He looked around and was pleased by the faces he could see – Pansy, Blaise, Theo and of course, his godfather, Professor Snape. A tingle went down his spine when he heard his Head of House whisper a number of complex privacy charms. It was only then that he noticed two other figures in the room, wrapped in nondescript grey woollen cloaks. He panicked a little and Severus noticed the direction of his gaze. He saw the others eyeing the unidentified persons nervously as well.

"Now, don't be afraid my young charges. These are associates of mine who will assist me in moving you all to a safe location. I will not reveal what that location is, because frankly, I don't know either!" He

said with a smile. The persons in the cloaks chuckled a little and Draco felt reassured.

“It is a lot to ask, but you have to trust in me. You will be blindfolded, as will I, and they will side-apparate us to where we need to go. From there I believe we will take other transportation before arriving at the safe house which has been arranged. Your blindfolds will not be removed until we are inside the house. So, can all of you agree to this?” He asked. Draco suppressed the fear that this was an elaborate plot to initiate them all early and nodded. The others did too. The people in the grey cloaks moved round the room quickly, placing blindfolds on all the people there. Draco squashed his apprehensions as everything went dark. He heard a quiet ‘Hold on’ as someone different took either of his hands. With a very faint, almost inaudible ‘pop’ they were gone.

When they reappeared, his senses revealed to him that they were outside of London, somewhere with a little countryside. He could smell the grass and the flowers, and he could hear the buzzing of bees and trilling of birds. He heard the clomping of feet as he and the others were led forward, and he was assisted into a car. After what felt like an eternity, the car stopped and the engine died. He was assisted out of the vehicle by gentle hands and led forward once more. Then he heard a voice he didn’t recognise.

“Draco Malfoy, welcome to the New Black Family Home.” Said the voice, and he felt a zing of magic as he was led through a very powerful ward. He could hear the voice welcoming his friends and he could also detect a key being used in a door. Once he was inside, the blindfold was removed from his face and he looked around curiously, blinking a little. When he saw who was sitting on the sofa, he tried not to get too angry.

Didn’t work though.

“Potter?” He declared furiously, indescribably pissed off that he just had to be rescued by Potter of all people. Harry didn’t seem to be too perturbed, good humour was showing in his eyes. Harry didn’t say

anything right away, he just looked past his school rival to see that everyone was in.

“Everyone here Belle?” He asked and one of the people in the grey cloaks stepped forward. She pulled down her hood and Draco saw she was an attractive, dark haired woman, maybe a few years younger than Snape.

“Yeah, everyone’s here Harry.” She replied taking off her cloak.

“Good stuff. Well, um, please do sit down. Can we get anyone a drink?” Harry offered and the little group of Slytherins looked as though he’d just grown another head. Draco heard quiet laughter from another corner of the room and snapped round to glare at the culprit. When he saw who it was, he was in shock.

“S-Sirius Black!” He declared pointing, his friends gasped and backed away from the Animagus.

“The very same! Welcome cousin. Before you ask, no I’m not dead and no I’m not a mass murderer. I believe my name has been cleared. Why don’t you all sit down? And have a nice cup of tea? Hmm?” Sirius said with what he hoped was an encouraging smile. They all just stared at him. And then there was another chuckle, a deep, very amused chuckle. Blaise stepped forward, and sat down next to Harry and Hermione.

“Never content to be normal, are you Potter?” He said as he turned to face the Golden Boy, offering his hand for the other young man to shake. Harry took it and shook it, smiling warmly.

“Au contraire Blaise. I would love to be normal. It’s the world that seems to have other ideas. Or maybe it’s just Dumbledore? I’ll have to check. Please don’t call me Potter, it’s not very friendly and it actually isn’t accurate anymore.” He said and he watched with delight as the new arrivals looked rather flummoxed. Snape decided to step in before anyone passed out from shock overload.

“Draco, Pansy, Theo, please sit down. You’ve all had quite a surprise, and coupled with the stress you’ve all been under, you need to rest. Please give Annabelle here your luggage. She’ll have it unshrunk it

and put in your bedrooms.” He said and the Slytherins visibly relaxed at the sound of his voice. In short order, they got them all seated and supplied with various drinks. After some small talk, they got down to specifics.

“Right then. Some things you should know.” Began Harry, who was stood in the centre of the room in front of the fireplace.

“We are not who you think we are. I am not Harry Potter any more – I am Harry Black. Sirius here adopted me as his son, at the same time as he married Remus there, and adopted Annabelle as his sister. So if you wish to maintain a certain distance by referring to me only by my surname, then please refer to me as ‘Black’ and not ‘Potter’. I would prefer for you to call me Harry, but with everything, I will understand if you don’t want to. I know it must irk some or all of you greatly to be seeking shelter with me, but please try and understand that we are all in the same boat here.” He paused and ran a hand through his messy hair. He sat down on the rug and crossed his legs.

“We are all here because we seek sanctuary from the people who would use us. Use our power, our names, our bodies even. Here you will be allowed to be you – whenever you work out who that is. It’s hard to put into words exactly. But we all understand what it is like to be a slave to your heritage, to have your thoughts and feelings ignored and trod on because no one believes you could be more than your name or family. Do you get what I’m trying to tell you?” He said frowning. He looked round at the faces of the Slytherins and saw them slowly nodding as if they did understand. Draco looked annoyed but Harry could see the mask slowly slipping.

“Look, this is all getting a bit heavy, so I’ll make it simple. This is your new home, and if you like, this could be your new family too. There’s no pressure – but Sirius and Remus have offered to adopt anyone who is disowned because of today. You don’t have to decide now or even in a year. But the offer is there, should you wish to take it up. Either way, Draco, Pansy, Blaise and Theo – welcome to the Black Family.” Harry said with a grin.

A few hours later and they were all sat round the dining room table. It had been enlarged to fit everyone and was laden with food. It had been three days since Severus had made his request on behalf of his students. They realised pretty quickly that they would need some help around the house if they were to keep to their tight training schedule. Harry had called Dobby and after a long negotiation with Hermione had agreed to pay him wages and give him days off if Dobby would agree to be the Black Family Elf. Dobby had been delighted to belong to a family again, and had sworn to keep his Master's secrets. He helped them prepare the house for the new guests, only too happy that there would soon be even more people to look after.

He and Belle had done a marvellous job on the new bedrooms, each with an ensuite bathroom. They'd realised that if everyone had their own bathroom it would avoid queues in the morning and eliminate one area of potential domestic discord.

The Slytherins had been rather jumpy after Professor Snape had had to leave, but were reassured when everyone submitted to yet another Unbreakable Vow not to reveal anything regarding their whereabouts or how they came to be there, to anyone outside the family. Draco, Pansy, Theo and Blaise were secretly very impressed with the way this family conducted themselves. They seemed to value openness and honesty, coupled with intense family loyalty and trust. Differences of opinion were encouraged however, and they were surprised by the conversations these people had round the dinner table.

"I've been reading a lot of women's magazines lately." Began Sirius and everyone swung round to look at him, blinking. He held up his hands to defend himself.

"Not trying to change gender or anything, I'm just trying to get some idea, as to the way women think." He explained. There were a few swift intakes of breath and the guys in the room shook their heads. "It's a waste of time isn't it!" Sirius declared. Pansy, Belle and Hermione scoffed in offence.

"But I do like reading the questionnaires in women's magazines. Always about men normally, you know. The main question, is usually 'What is it, that you first look for in a man?' Every single time, number

one answer is always ‘Good sense of humour.’” And here he looked at the girls. They glanced at each other and nodded. Sirius studied them for a moment.

“Bullshit!” He declared and they huffed a little, then men in the room laughed. “We’re not buying that one, I’m sorry. OK ladies, you go into a bar. Standing at the bar is Kevin Costner, not renowned for his sense of humour, but he’s having a drink and he’s talking to Ken Dodd.” They all burst out laughing at this. Sirius continued. “Who you gonna choose eh? Robin Hood or Robbing the Tax Man?” Some of the purebloods looked a bit confused, not really getting the muggle references. It didn’t really bother them too much, they were more engrossed in the fact that a friendly discussion, even jokes were encouraged while they were dining. This was very new for them, and they were finding it hard to acclimatise, sitting stiffly in their chairs. Remus noticed this and smiled at them.

“You’ll have to forgive us I’m afraid. I’ve tried in vain to instil some nice manners into this lot, and have given it up as a lost cause.” He said, laughter in his eyes. They smiled a bit sheepishly and tried to chill out a little.

“Ha! Dad wouldn’t know nice manners if they jumped up and bit him in the arse!” Said Harry with a snort of laughter.

“Why you little pup!” Sirius declared and lunged at him. Harry yelped and jumped up out of his seat. Thus began a chase round the dining room table which, after a few minutes of running and shouting, resulted in Sirius having Harry pinned to the floor, tickling him mercilessly.

“Aargh! Enough – please – I give up – I take it back!” Harry gasped out in between laughs. Sirius was laughing too and jumped up, offering him a hand to help him up. Harry rose and swayed a little on his feet. Sirius’s whole stance changed instantly.

“Are you alright son? I didn’t hurt you for real did I?” He asked, worriedly. Harry raised a hand to pat him on the shoulder.

“Nah, I’m fine Dad. Just a bit winded.” He said and he sat back down in his seat next to Hermione and Theo. Sirius returned to his chair at the head of the table but kept casting concerned glances at Harry.

“Phew. I’m all in. We’ve got an early start tomorrow right?” Harry asked, turning his attention back to his pudding.

“Uh-huh. Breakfast is between seven and eight, and training starts promptly at eight fifteen.” Belle replied.

“Training?” Asked Blaise curiously. Belle nodded.

“Yep. Harry recently discovered his magic had been bound and with the help of Professor Snape the binding has been removed. So we’ve been training to help him control his new strength and we’ve thrown in some physical training, Advanced DADA – that sort of thing. Harry’s also learned to be a Master Occlumens and we’ve been researching a way to sever his link to Old Moldy Voldy.” Belle added, taking a sip of her drink. The young purebloods were taken aback by the news of the binding and what she’d called the Dark Lord.

“How dare you? Such disrespect...” Theo began before he realised what he was saying. He looked down at his plate confusedly. “Sorry guys, I don’t know where that came from.” He said, in a small voice.

“It’s OK Theo. You’ve been conditioned to respond that way by your family. It’ll take a while for you to overcome that reaction.” Remus supplied with a kindly smile. Pansy, who was on the other side of Theo, put an arm round him in comfort.

“Conditioned?” Asked Draco. Remus nodded, and Hermione started to explain, her normal enthusiastic voice was missing however, and her expression was one of regret and sadness.

“My guess would be what muggles refer to as ‘Operant Conditioning’. Operant conditioning, sometimes called ‘instrumental conditioning’ or ‘instrumental learning’, was first extensively studied by a muggle named Edward L. Thorndike, who observed the behaviour of cats trying to escape from home-made puzzle boxes. When first constrained in the boxes, the cats took a long time to escape. With experience, ineffective responses occurred less frequently and

successful responses occurred more frequently, enabling the cats to escape in less time over successive trials.” Hermione paused, thinking about how the Deatheater children were probably not subjected to anything as innocuous as trying to decipher a puzzle box when they were subjected to their conditioning. She continued.

“In his ‘Law of Effect’, Thorndike theorised that successful responses, those producing satisfying consequences, were "stamped in" by the experience and thus occurred more frequently. Unsuccessful responses, those producing annoying consequences, were stamped out and subsequently occurred less frequently. In short, some consequences strengthened behaviour and some consequences weakened behaviour. B.F. Skinner, another muggle, built upon Thorndike's ideas to construct a more detailed theory of operant conditioning based on reinforcement and punishment.” She told them and all most of them regarded her with awe.

“Just where to do you find the time to learn all of this Granger?” Draco spluttered. Hermione shrugged.

“I’ve always been interested in behaviour and psychology. So I read up on it over the summer.” She explained.

“Reinforcement and punishment?” Prompted Pansy. Hermione turned to her.

“Right, well. Reinforcement and punishment, the core ideas of operant conditioning, are either positive (adding a stimulus to an organism's environment), or negative (removing a stimulus from an organism's environment). This creates a total of four basic consequences, with the addition of no consequence (i.e. nothing happens). It's important that we note that in theory, organisms are not reinforced or punished; behaviour is reinforced or punished. Though from what I’ve heard, that last part may not be completely true in your cases.” She said and a lot of the people round the table looked quite sick.

“So you think our parents did this to us?” Blaise said, looking a bit green.

“Oh yes, and probably quite deliberately too. After all, you were sitting here, having abandoned your family because you did not wish to submit to such an evil bastard, and yet when Belle insulted him you flared up in defence of him. If that isn’t a conditioned response, I don’t know what is.” She replied, a little sadly.

“Can it be broken?” Sirius asked and the Slytherins looked at her expectantly.

“Most definitely. With a little time and patience, you’ll all be just fine. Though we won’t be using any mind games on you or anything. I don’t think we need to go as far as de-programming.” She said with a reassuring smile. They sat back and thought about it, a few sighs released as they all tried to digest what they’d just heard.

“Well, as interesting as this has been, you all look bloody exhausted. I know it’s reasonably early, but I think it’s time for bed, hmmm?” Belle suggested and there were a few tired nods. Dobby appeared to clear the table and fought off anyone trying to help him. The four new arrivals followed Belle upstairs while Harry and Hermione went to the living room with Remus and Sirius.

Belle pointed each of them to a room and left them to their own devices. She went to her room to put a hot water bottle in her bed, still resolutely doing things the muggle way. As she was making her way back downstairs, she passed Draco’s room to see him sat on his bed in his pyjamas, looking blankly at the wall. Her heart was struck by the lost expression in his eyes. She knocked softly on the door and he jumped.

“May I come in?” She asked and he nodded.

“Why don’t you get into bed, hmm? I imagine it’s been rather an eventful day, and you need your rest.” Belle said gently and Draco’s eyes flashed as if he wanted to snap at her. He didn’t though, and he got into bed and sank under the covers. She automatically tucked them up to his chin and pressed a kiss to his forehead.

“Sleep tight. Sweet dreams.” She said and Draco’s eyes widened. Then she saw tears forming in his eyes and without thinking, she gathered him up in her arms.

“Oh my dear boy. What’s the matter?” She asked, berating herself for such a stupid question. He sobbed into her neck, the words he was speaking muffled by her hair.

“It’s just – no one...” He hiccupped between his sobs and then continued. “No one has ever done that, for me, I...” He said and then he couldn’t speak anymore. Outwardly she was all soothing words and calming hugs. Inwardly she was furiously raging at her Father and this boy’s parents. Her Father for encouraging people to be so horrible and disgusting and the Malfoys for clearly never showing their son one moment of affection or love. He had been an adorable baby and an even sweeter toddler. She knew that because when they were together, Severus had shown her pictures of him and told stories of his exploits and adventures with pride. How could his Mother and Father have denied him the care and love he needed?

“It’s OK Draco. I think you’ll find most of us here know what you are going through, having experienced the same treatment as you. Do not be ashamed by your reaction, if anyone should be ashamed, it is your parents. But don’t worry, that time is past you now. I promise you, we’ll all be here for you, should you need us.” She said and his tears slowly subsided. She tucked him back in, and his eyes closed. He’d worn himself out with the overwhelming emotional upheaval that today had been for him. She leaned in close and pressed another kiss to his brow, smoothing his hair away from his eyes.

“You’ll never be alone again.” She whispered, and then switching the light off, she got up and left the room, softly closing the door behind her.

Chapter Fourteen – Where the Headmaster Makes a Demand

“What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy?”

Mahatma Gandhi (1869 - 1948), *"Non-Violence in Peace and War"*

Severus spoke the password and stepped onto the revolving stairway which led to the Headmaster's office with a strong feeling of trepidation. When he had returned to Hogwarts the day before, after making sure his young charges would be well looked after, Dumbledore had confronted him demanding to know where Harry was and what he had been doing. Severus had explained that he was under an Unbreakable Vow and couldn't tell Albus anything and he had been less than impressed. He had a bad feeling about the meeting this evening, he just didn't know why.

The stairway stopped and he stepped through the door and into the old man's office. Albus was sitting behind his desk, looking stern, and there were two chairs facing him. Minerva McGonagall was sat in one of them, looking a little worried, so the Potions Master took the free seat and tried to work out what had scared the Head of Gryffindor. She kept flicking glances between Snape and Dumbledore, apprehension clear in her eyes.

“Now Severus.” Dumbledore began, in a dark voice devoid of his usual good cheer. “I've been very patient so far, but I must ask you, yet again, to reveal to me young Harry's location and to help me to get him back under our control. He must not be allowed to remain with that woman!” He said, going slightly red in the face. Snape wondered what had happened to the calm, collected Headmaster he was used to. He bristled at the older man referring to Annabelle as ‘that woman’. He couldn't believe the way Dumbledore had treated

her. Sure, her Father was hideously evil, but there wasn't a dark bone in Belle's body.

"Headmaster, I appreciate the gravity of the situation, but as I already told you, I cannot reveal to you what you wish to know. I am under an Unbreakable..." Severus began, trying to be diplomatic, but he was cut off by Albus.

"Yes I know, an Unbreakable Vow. Didn't I warn you she was tricky? Just like her Father! I know of the issue presented here. But I've been speaking to Minerva and I think we have found a way around it." He said, regaining his composure somewhat and smiling smugly.

'A way round an Unbreakable Vow? How? It's unbreakable!' Snape thought, and he looked at Minerva in confusion. She looked a little frightened.

"Albus, I really don't think it's worth the risk! After all, Harry will be back at school soon, and..." She too was cut off by the old man.

"Yes, I know he will. But he would have been out of our control for more than a month! That is unacceptable. He must be close by, where we and the Order members can exercise our influence and shape his mind, give him direction and mould him into what we wish him to be. By his being with her, we stand to lose everything we have gained thus far. No, he must be returned, and you Severus must be the one to do it." Albus declared, crossing his arms. Severus wondered if he was expecting a round of applause for such a stirring speech. He also wondered if the ageing wizard knew just how much of his manipulations Harry was aware of and how the young man totally disregarded all of them. The old fool was completely in the dark when it came to his Almighty Saviour it seemed.

"What would you have me do, Headmaster?" Severus asked, the trepidation from earlier resurfacing violently and making him want to shudder. Something was terribly wrong here. He could see McGonagall wringing her hands a little. What was the old man going to ask him to do? Kidnap Potter?

Kidnap Black? He mentally corrected himself.

“Severus, you have one day, to convince young Mr Potter to return to his relatives or to go to Grimmauld Place on his own steam. He should also bring that woman with him so that we can take her into protective custody. If however you are unsuccessful, I will invoke the power of the vows you made when you joined the Order of the Phoenix and command you to reveal what you know. Those oaths should override the Unbreakable Vow they made you submit to.” Dumbledore announced, the smug smile evident on his face once more. Snape sucked in a breath. The man was an idiot! He prejudices were blinding him, severely impairing his judgement! The Potions Professor knew that he had made those Unbreakable Vows willingly, and so the oaths to the Order would not override them, instead, Dumbledore’s insistence would kill him! The two forces would battle with each other in his head and tear him apart!

“Headmaster I....surely you know the risk involved? This could kill me!” Severus said, trying not to submit to the panic that was trying to rise in his chest. Albus was being irrational. The few weeks Harry could spend with a loving family would strengthen him, it was a positive thing. Why couldn't Albus see that?

“Yes Severus, I am well aware of the danger to you involved. But this is necessary. We must have him back – he is too valuable to be left to his own devices.” Dumbledore replied, no hint of concern or worry for Snape’s welfare on his face. There wasn't even any clear worry that he would lose his Deatheater spy. Severus got up immediately, he had some thinking to do.

“If that is all, Headmaster?” He said in a cold voice and Dumbledore nodded to him. Severus turned quickly and marched out of the office. Only when he got to his own chambers did he stop and give into the fear, sliding down the back of the door and holding his head in his hands.

“What the bloody fuck am I going to do now?” He said to himself.

After sitting and letting his worries rage around his head for a few long minutes, Snape got up and sat down in his favourite armchair. He didn’t know what to do. He knew he couldn’t work this out on his

own, he needed to speak to the others. He felt a warm glow rise in his stomach and spread through his whole body at the thought that for the first time in many a long year, he had people he could go to, people who would listen to him and try and work things out with him. He fished out a piece of charmed paper from his pocket which had a string of numbers on it.

Time to head for Hogsmeade.

Albus and Minerva watched him leaving the castle and heading for the front gates. They waited for him to pass the wards, expecting him to apparate, but were rather surprised when he didn't. He kept walking, looking like he was going towards Hogsmeade.

"Ah, I see now. He is going to drown his sorrows in the Three Broomsticks. Then tomorrow he will lead us directly to them." Dumbledore said with glee. Minerva just swallowed. She had seen this side of Albus before, during the first war, and it scared her.

Severus nodded to Rosmerta as he walked into the little pub and made his way in the direction of the back to a charmed payphone. It had several privacy charms surrounding it, so he was safe to use it. He put some money in the slot and picked up the receiver. Retrieving the scrap of paper he proceeded to dial the number written there. He waited patiently as it rang a few times and then breathed a sigh of relief when he heard Belle's voice at the other end.

"*Hello?*" She said.

"Belle, it's me, Severus." He said and he smiled when he heard lots of shouting and laughter in the background.

"*Severus! Hey! Hang on a minute.*" She replied and he heard her yelling. "*Will you lot shut up for a second? I'm on the phone!*" He chuckled a little as he heard several voices.

"*On the what?*" That was Blaise.

"*Ooh! A fellytone!*" That was definitely Pansy.

"A felly what? Are you sure that's right Pans?" That was Theo.

"It's a telephone you morons. Muggles use them to talk long distance with each other." That was Draco.

"Ooh! Is Belle on the fellytone?" And that was Sirius.

"It's a telephone you moron!" That was all four of them. Severus almost forgot what he had rung about, this was turning out to be vastly entertaining.

"I said shut up you lot! I can't hear what Severus is saying!" This then of course started a round of exclamations and shouts of *'Tell him we said hi!'*. When they all finally disappeared somewhere or at least, kept quiet after Belle's threat of boiled cabbage for dinner, Severus was feeling much better. His earlier blind panic had been thoroughly quashed and he felt like if they all worked together, between them, they would be able to work something out. He paused to reflect a second on the fact that he sounded rather like a Gryffindor. And then shrugged it off, now was not the time to worry about such things.

"Right. Sorry about that. Hi Severus, what can I do for you?" Belle said, in a warm, welcoming tone. He smiled again, relishing the soft sound of her voice.

"There's trouble at Hogwarts. I can't explain over the phone. Can you bring me to your place?" He asked. There was a pause at the other end.

"Dumbledore." She replied and it wasn't a question. *"Sure thing. How about we meet in the same place as yesterday, in say, thirty minutes?"* She offered and he nodded, forgetting that she couldn't see him.

"Yes that's fine. See you in half an hour." He said and after a quick goodbye, he hung the phone up. He let his hand rest on the receiver for a second before stepping away.

Belle met Severus in the same room at the Leaky Cauldron, and after blindfolding and apparating him to her car, they made pretty good

time getting back to the house. They stepped through the wards and into the house, and Belle quickly removed the strip of cloth over his eyes. He was confronted with several happy faces, and everyone got up to greet him. He felt a twist in his heart as he looked over at Annabelle. To be greeted this way when coming home, just like in a normal family, reminded him of all the hopes and dreams he'd indulged in when he'd met her. He'd wanted a family with her, one day. He had wanted it so much, he'd even imagined the house they would live in, and the children they might have.

All that had been snatched away when she left him. He was completely devastated, and totally furious. He had been so angry for so long, that it was strangely liberating to be able to just let it go, or at least, redirect it to the person who actually deserved it. He felt a lightness in his chest, and his dreams had begun to take shape in his imagination once more. Now Albus threatened to take all that away again for his foolish power games. Well, he wouldn't let him. Now it looked like he could get Annabelle back, he wasn't going to lose her again. His dreams would not be enough to sustain him if he let her slip through his fingers.

After all, you cannot live in dreams.

"Come on everyone, we need to sit. Severus has news for us from Hogwarts." Belle declared and they all regarded him wide eyed. He could see the fear his Slytherins were trying to hide so desperately. The younger people asked if they wanted them to leave the room but the four adults shook their heads.

"This concerns all of us. The whole family." Sirius decreed and they shot him shy smiles. It meant a lot to everyone to think of themselves as a family. For them all to be included in something that way, it meant a great deal.

"How could the Headmaster think this is a bad thing? Sure these lot can be sickeningly sappy sometimes, but it's hardly cause to threaten someone's life." Severus thought to himself.

He sat down on the armchair near the fire, and Belle offered him a drink. He nodded and she poured four glasses of whiskey, something

told her they were going to need it. She gave him a glass, along with Sirius and Remus and then sat on the arm of his chair and looked into the fire as he spoke.

“There’s no easy way to say this, so I’ll make it plain. Albus has issued me with an ultimatum: either Harry returns to his ‘shelter’ or Grimmauld Place by this time tomorrow, or, Albus will use the magic of the oaths I swore to the Order of the Phoenix, to try and break the Unbreakable Vows I have made to the family.” Snape relayed with a sneer. Several shocked gasps travelled round the room. The teacher in him was proud that these were some of his brightest students, and they all thoroughly understood the implication of what the Headmaster was demanding. He looked at Belle, but her face was turned away from him and he couldn’t read her expression.

He’d heard no sound of surprise from her.

He figured it was because she had been subjected to Albus Dumbledore’s bad side for the entirety of her education at Hogwarts. He put a tentative arm around her waist, not being one for affectionate gestures, and drew her to him a little. He heard her sharp intake of breath and then hastily put his glass down on the coffee table as she turned and threw herself into his arms. He felt the sobs which wracked her body and held her a little tighter.

“But...but that’ll kill you Professor!” Hermione said with wide eyes and a frightened look on her face as she voiced what everyone was already thinking. He looked at Harry who was sitting next to his girlfriend, his face unreadable.

“Well, that tears it then. We can’t let him kill Professor Snape; I’ll just have to go back.” Harry declared, looking resigned. Sirius and Remus flared up then.

“No you can’t, Harry they’ll kill you if you go back!” Sirius shouted and Harry leapt up out of his seat, ignoring Hermione who was trying to pull him back down again.

“And Dumbledore’ll kill Snape if I stay! What are you saying Sirius? That his life is worth less than mine? That’s he’s expendable? That’s how they think – Dumbledore and Voldemort – not us!” Harry

declared firmly and the other people in the room watched this volatile exchange warily.

"No, Harry, that's not what I'm saying. I don't think like either of them. There just has to be another way, a third option. Something we're not seeing." Sirius replied and he sat down with his husband and sighed. Harry sat down too.

"I'm sorry Padfoot. Didn't mean to shout at you. I just...it makes me so angry. How could he just throw Snape's life away like that? Sure, he's not the nicest bloke in the world, but..." Harry said, bewildered.

"I am right over here, you know." Severus said, laughter in his eyes. Harry jumped a little, but relaxed when he saw the look in the Potions Professor's eyes.

"Sorry Professor, forgot for a second..." Harry said with a rueful grin. Severus actually chuckled.

"No problem Harry. As much as it pains me to say this, thank you for your concern." He said and Harry nodded.

"There is another option. It is rather drastic, but I fear it might be our only recourse." Came a quiet voice from the sofa. Everyone turned to look at the owner of the voice.

"Yes Mr Zabini? Do you have a suggestion?" Snape asked and his young student frowned.

"Well, you could bond with one of the Black family. One of the ones who adopted each other. Miss Black, for example would be perfect. The bonding would allow you to share in their family protection magic, and, if it is the right kind of bonding it should override the oaths you swore to the Order of the Phoenix." Blaise explained. Snape worked hard not to splutter. Surely there was another way...bonding was so...final. But then so is death, he reminded himself. And Sirius was right, loath as he was to admit it. Without a third option, either he or Harry would die. Hermione sat forward a little as she considered Blaise's suggestion.

“For this to work, it would have to be a deeper bonding than normal – we’d have to use the soul mate bond.” Hermione advised and everyone looked confused.

“But Hermione, won’t that only work if we’re already soul mates?” Belle protested. Having stopped crying a few minutes ago, she was now back on the arm of her chair, drink in hand. Severus suddenly felt like he couldn’t sit still anymore and he got up and began pacing. The young witch shook her head in answer to Belle’s question.

“Soul mates, at least along the lines that myths and legends describe them, don’t really exist. You see, the term ‘Soul Mates’ means many things. The theory is that as we all evolve from the same source of consciousness creation - we could say that we are all soul mates in a manner of speaking. Soul mates can have various types of relationships, which do not always include romantic love. We tend to think of our soul mate as The One who is there for us and to make us feel complete. Anyone who is in your biological family - or adopted family - or pseudo-family - is a soul mate to you. We feel closer to certain souls, because we have attracted them into our lives as they are on the same frequency as us or because we want to work out issues with them. By bonding the two of you as ‘Soul Mates’ we’re just formalising the relationship that is already there and making it deeper, and more permanent.” Hermione sat back as she finished her explanation.

“How permanent is permanent, Miss Granger?” Severus asked, slipping back into teacher mode in his agitation.

“For as long as you both shall live, Professor.” Hermione replied in a small voice.

Belle and Severus thought about it. Really thought about it. The problem wasn’t with the idea of bonding with the other. It was that it was forcing them to take a step in their relationship that they’d considered before and which, separately, they had both re-examined in view of them meeting up again. But neither of them had expected for things to be so serious between them, so soon. Severus looked at his former flame.

"I don't know what to say. I'm so angry that we're being put into this position. I don't see why Albus feels he has to divide us in the middle of a War. I don't understand why he can't see past his preconceptions of you, and see the woman you really are. I...I just don't know this is just too fast! I won't be forced..." Severus said and he sat down heavily, tossing back the rest of his whiskey with a grimace. The others in the room slipped out giving the two of them some privacy to discuss things.

"I don't know what to say either Severus. This feels to fast, too much, too soon for me as well. But on the other hand I won't pretend that the idea of bonding with you doesn't spread an excited thrill through me and make me want to giggle like a school girl. I have wanted this, for so long that quite frankly I don't feel I can turn down the opportunity now it has presented itself again." Belle said, she too taking a big gulp of her drink. She knew admitting her desire to bond with him would be a risk, but she had to be honest with him. He would accept no less. Severus sat forward.

"I won't deny that I want it either. But that doesn't mean that all the reasons you left me aren't still valid. I am still in service to him and he could still find out about you, through me. He could still get to you, and...hurt you. Have you forgotten this Belle?" He said in a quiet voice. She shook her head.

"Of course I haven't, I'm not a child Severus. But I would rather face that risk with you, than spend another single day in the empty half life I have been living in the last seven years, without you." Belle replied, deadly serious. Snape closed his eyes for a moment, and then in one fluid motion he shot up and pulled her into a desperate, emotion filled kiss. When they parted they were both panting, and out of breath, overcome with the feelings coursing through them. Without breaking eye contact, Severus got down on one knee, and pulled something from an inner pocket in his robes. He swallowed through his ire at the sappy display he was about to make of himself, and took a deep breath.

"I once heard a saying: 'A successful marriage requires falling in love many times, always with the same person.' And I have fallen in love with you everyday since the moment I met you. Belle, my sweet

Annabelle, will you marry me?" He asked her, his heart most definitely in his eyes. He heard a few quiet 'Awww's' coming from the hallway and then a few muffled 'Shhhs's'.

"That lot would make terrible spies!" He thought, with a silent chuckle. He looked at his Belle, her eyes unusually bright as she smiled down at him, and waited.

"Yes!" She declared and nearly toppled him over when she threw herself at him. There was a round of applause from the rest of the family as they stopped pretending that they weren't listening to every word that had been said, and they filed into the room to congratulate them.

Once he'd wished the happy couple well, Harry James Black took a step away from the others and watched them. He was inwardly seething that Dumbledore had tried to take him away from his family yet again, and then he was willing to sacrifice a man who like him, had had so little in life. He swore then, privately, that whatever happened, he would make the world safe again.

Safe from both of them.

Chapter Fifteen - Where Ophidiophobia is Confessed

“It is unwise to be too sure of one's own wisdom. It is healthy to be reminded that the strongest might weaken and the wisest might err.”

Mahatma Gandhi

Professor Dumbledore,

I hope this letter finds you in good health. No matter what has occurred in the last six years, and despite our less than harmonious relationship, I don't wish you any harm. That said, I am appalled at your behaviour and actions in the last two months. I understand your reasoning for hiding so many things from me, and I appreciate that you were doing it for what you thought was my own good. I ask you, no, beg you, not to go through with your ultimatum. Professor Snape has sacrificed so much for all of us, please don't put his life in jeopardy for something so small. My family and I have discussed matters, and we propose a compromise. I will return to Hogwarts on 1st September for my seventh and final year. I will undertake whatever training you believe is necessary and I will do everything in my power to defeat the Dark Lord.

However, I do have the following conditions: You will not force Professor Snape to try and break the Unbreakable Vows he has willingly made to myself and my family. No matter what you believe, if you try to force him, he will die. Secondly, when I return, my family – Annabelle, Remus and Sirius Black, will come with me. I would like to leave Gryffindor Tower and live with them in the castle. They are my guardians so I will take any suggestions made by yourself or the Order under advisement from them. Thirdly, I would like the following people to live with us and receive the same protection as I do: Draco Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson, Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini. I assure you that none of them are marked, and they remain loyal to the light.

I will understand if you feel you are unable to accept these terms. I implore you to think long and hard before you make a decision about

this. If you cannot agree to compromise with me on this issue, then I am afraid I must take my leave of Hogwarts and will complete my schooling at home.

Please Professor, please let us work together. The Dark divides and punishes its followers, the light works in harmony combining the strength of every member to triumph over evil. Don't let your anger and prejudices lead you blindly into rash actions, don't drive us away.

Don't make the same mistakes as he has.

With hope,

Harry Black.

Albus Dumbledore let the letter drop from his shaking hands and sat back in his chair, closing his eyes. A trace on the letter revealed it had been posted to an owl office from the muggle Royal Mail and sent on from there. Payment had been in muggle cash, and there was no way to find out where it had been sent from. The muggle postmark on the envelope showed it had been sent from London, but nothing more. There was no way to find them if they were in London, there were just too many people living there.

The Headmaster sighed in frustration. They were at an impasse. He could not let the young man run wild, with no Order control or direction. Even though Remus was with them, he knew he had no hold over the werewolf. But it seemed Harry had him at a disadvantage.

He did not need Hogwarts anymore; Hogwarts needed him.

Given who he was now living with it seemed, he would not need to return to the school to finish his wizarding education. The people he had gathered there were more than capable of teaching him what he needed to know. And what's more, the boy clearly knew it. He slammed a fist down on his desk in irritation. Why couldn't the blasted boy he do as he was told?

Severus was lost to him too, that woman had obviously sunk her filthy claws into him. What should he do? He pondered it for some time, not noticing it was growing dark. Suddenly both his hands slapped down on the table.

He would let them come. He would agree to every single one of this child's 'compromises'. After all, it would bring them under this roof, where he could keep an eye on them. And then? Who knew? That dirty whore of a witch was bound to slip up sooner or later, after all, blood was blood, and hers was the blackest of all.

Yes, that would do very nicely indeed.

Harry sat on one of the wooden chairs at the picnic table in the garden and thought about what he would do now. Truly, despite everything, he did want to return to Hogwarts. Dumbledore or no, it was his first home. He missed being there. He missed his friends too and he was upset that he may not be able to finish his education with them. But they had to think of the whole family. After many a long discussion between all of them, and Harry was thrilled every time he thought of how large their family was now, they had decided on appealing to what was left of Dumbledore's better nature.

With everything that he'd done to all of them, no one wanted to extend an olive branch, but Harry convinced them when he reminded them what they were really going back for.

"Look, guys, I don't like this any more than you do. I really don't want to be in reach of that manipulative bastard. I don't want any of us exposed to the danger he represents. But Voldemort will come to Hogwarts first. And who will suffer for it? The students, the children which live there. They will be the first to die when he attacks. So we'll go back, if only to protect them." Harry had declared and the others had slowly agreed.

They would return to Hogwarts for their final year. They would all go together, they just had to. None of them were stupid though, and they would all be sleeping with one eye open. That wouldn't be the only precaution they would be taking however.

Pansy, Theo and Hermione turned out to be the best researchers in their little group, and they'd poured over the texts which Belle had stolen from her Father, looking for anything which could help them. They'd discovered some powerful protection and warding charms and had looked into ways they could use them. In the end, they'd decided on charming pendants which they would all wear. Belle had gone out into Guildford and returned with ten rather pretty snowflake necklaces, one for each of them. It was decided that Harry, being the strongest, should cast the protective spells over the jewellery which he promptly did and handed them out.

Harry had been surprised that he didn't feel even a little bit tired after casting such complex charms ten times over. Draco and the Slytherins had been in awe of his apparent magical prowess. And not a little bit daunted.

"Wow, Pot-, I mean, Black! Just how powerful are you these days?" Draco had asked in strained voice. Harry had shrugged.

"I don't know Draco. As long as it's enough to kill that snake-faced hypocrite, who cares?" He had replied and the Slytherins had looked a tad frightened. They'd been a bit wary of the young Gryffindor for a few days, but had slowly relaxed as they got to know him better. And they found they liked what they saw – Harry was a truly kind and generous person, but he had an understated, sharp sense of humour and a well developed mind which caught them out a few times. Blaise had even mentioned about him embracing his Slytherin side which had made Harry laugh uproariously.

"What's so funny, Harry?" Blaise had asked, as Harry doubled over with laughter. He held up a hand to indicate that he wasn't capable of speech just then and Blaise shrugged and waited. Once Harry had regained his composure, he explained about the Sorting Hat, which had left the four younger Slytherins shocked once more, and the older Head of Slytherin muttering incoherently to himself at the kitchen table.

Harry was startled out of his contemplation when he heard the back door close and footsteps approach behind him. He smiled and waited

for whoever it was to join him and smiled even more when he saw it was his Father.

“Morning Dad.” Harry greeted him. Sirius yawned and smiled.

“Morning? It’s the bloody middle of the night! Why do we have to get up so blasted early?” Sirius whined and Harry chuckled. It was the same every morning; Sirius would come out and join him and whinge about getting up at the crack of dawn. To him, this wasn’t early. He was up way earlier than this at Privet Drive, well, before they’d stopped letting him out the room that was. Before, it was the only way he could use the bathroom and kitchen with any peace. Seven o’clock, which was what time it was now, was a bit of a lie in, as far as Harry was concerned. Sirius just snorted and took a sip of the tea he’d brought with him.

“Actually Harry, I was thinking last night. We should start Animagus lessons for you and the others.” Sirius said and Harry smiled sheepishly.

“Um, something I ought to have told you Padfoot...” His voice trailed off as he blushed a little.

“What’s that Harry?” Sirius asked, curiously.

“Well...this...” Harry said, and he bit his lip in concentration. There was a faint ‘pop’ and then there in Harry’s place was a snake. Sirius jumped up and backed away instinctively when the snake’s head rose and swayed a little. He could’ve sworn there was a twinkle in those black eyes.

“S-S-Snake!” Sirius screeched pointing rather stupidly at Harry. There was hissing as the snake slithered along the paving stones towards his Father.

“Yikes!” Declared Sirius and he bolted into the house. He ran past a disgruntled Snape and a confused Belle, into the hall and up the stairs. Snape started grumbling to himself while Annabelle went to investigate outside. She saw the elegant Asp Viper slithering his way into the kitchen. Severus turned and saw the snake too.

"Vipera aspis, a venomous viper species commonly known as the Asp Viper. Hmm...this one has the vertical eyes, the triangular head, and quite fine dorsal scales in a black zig-zag shape. Harry, I presume?" He drawled and the snake reared up. Belle laughed and started to hiss in Parseltongue.

"Greetings young one. It does not surprise me that you are a Viper. How long have you been able to take this form?" Belle asked him. Severus jumped when she started hissing, he'd forgotten she had that ability too.

"Only a year now little Mother." Harry replied, the honorific coming naturally to him in this form. The snake side of him recognised her as a speaker and thus worthy of respect. Her age was what made the term 'little Mother' correct. Snakes were, as a species, very polite. After all, who knew how venomous the other reptile was – overall they found it easier to get along with each other.

Snape had crossed his arms, but had a wry smile on his face. After everything that had happened recently it wasn't that much of a shock that here was yet another ability that came to Harry so easily. He looked at Belle to try and gauge her reaction but jumped again, when he saw she had disappeared. A soft hiss drew his attention to the floor, and he saw that in place of his wife-to-be was a beautiful coral snake. He wasn't surprised that either of their Animagus forms were snakes - they both had a connection to Voldemort and thus, Slytherin. The fact that they were both Parselmouths probably influenced it too.

He thought the particular types of snakes which they turned into were rather fitting as well. Viper-Harry was one of the deadliest snakes in Western Europe, his venom contained a hemotoxin, which causes cardiac arrest in the victim. Belle however, though venomous, was much smaller and her fangs weren't strong enough to pierce through clothes or shoes like Harry's would. Not being particularly aggressive, most Coral Snakes are quite shy and reclusive makes bites quite rare. Belle could be very shy at times, and she'd spent the last seven years as a recluse. Coral Snakes were also fossorial, which meant that they were adapted to bury themselves underground.

He smiled in delight and offered his hand to her. She tested the air around his hand with a few flicks of her tongue and then apparently satisfied, she slithered up his hand and coiled around his arm. Severus went and sat at the kitchen table with Snake-Belle, speaking quietly to her and softly stroking her scales. Harry watched the older man for a few moments, and then decided he should go and find his Dad so that he could reassure himself that the poor man hadn't died of fright.

Harry found him cowering in the corner of the living room as Snuffles with Remus, who was half amused and half exasperated. He was trying to coax the great black dog to change back into Sirius.

"Look, here now, Harry's here. He's not a snake anymore; he's not going to hurt you. Look!" He was saying softly. Snuffles looked over at Harry and barked, pausing for a moment before leaping on him and licking the whole left hand side of his face.

"Eeeugh! Snuffles! Leave off!" Harry said laughing at the silly canine. Sirius sat back and barked again in satisfaction, obviously having decided that Harry was OK. He blurred for a second, changing back and then offering a hand to help the young man off the floor.

"Sorry for freaking out son, but I've got Ophidiophobia, I've no control over it, I just go into a panic around snakes, you know?" He explained with a shudder. Harry just smiled and pat him on the arm.

"Don't worry about it Dad. Though, I wouldn't go into the kitchen right now, because Auntie Belle is a snake too, and she'd currently coiled around Snape's arm." Harry supplied and Sirius gulped. Remus sighed and put his arms around his husband, pulling him back to rest against his chest.

"Hey, don't worry about it Siri. I'm far scarier than any snake, I'll protect you." He said in a soothing voice, and Sirius closed his eyes for a moment, visibly relaxing from his tense state.

"Thanks Moony, I know you will." He replied and he turned to peck the other man on the lips. Harry was torn between embarrassment and a sappy content feeling as he witnessed the newlyweds

displaying such sweet affection. He shrugged, and went back out into the hall to go into the kitchen. Seeing that Snake-Belle was still coiled around the Potions Master, Harry decided to get a start on breakfast, laughing as Dobby fussed around him, not wanting 'Mr Harry Black, sir' to have to cook for himself. He could already hear the irritated grumbles of the others as their alarm clocks woke them and they made their way downstairs.

Eventually he gave in, and let Dobby take over. The poor little guy looked like he was going to have a nervous breakdown or something if Harry didn't cease and desist his attempts at cooking immediately. As he watched the enthusiastic house elf whiz round the kitchen his thoughts returned to the letter he'd sent Dumbledore that morning. He was scared; he didn't know what the old codger would make of it. He really didn't want to subject his family to the dangers that the school now presented. But he couldn't just abandon all the innocents that would suffer if Voldemort were to attack the school. Even Snape didn't think he was being overly arrogant by saying the castle would fall if Harry wasn't there to protect it- it was a simple fact. He sighed and sat down at the now, very large kitchen table.

He watched as Blaise and Draco fought over the brown sauce. They'd been rather sceptical about many of the muggle things which filled Belle's home, but had started to get used to them in the short time they'd been there.

He watched Remus and Sirius as they held hands under the table, Sirius trying desperately not to be scared of the bright coral snake now wrapped around Severus neck, head darting out every now and then to steal a bit of food off the older Slytherin's plate.

He watched Pansy, Theo and Hermione as they argued and debated over the various protections they'd discovered, and where they would look to try and find a way for Harry to sever his connection to the evil bastard, which resided in his scar.

He was desperately afraid that he would lose one of them in the coming struggle. It tore at his heart to think any of them could get hurt, he wanted to run, run and hide. But he couldn't, they had to go back.

Come what may.

Chapter Sixteen – In Which the Extended Black Family Rides The Hogwarts Express

“Never let the future disturb you. You will meet it, if you have to, with the same weapons of reason which today arm you against the present.”

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (121 AD - 180 AD), *Meditations*, 200 A.D

It was the night before they were due to ride the train for the Hogwart's student's seventh and final year. Everyone was finding it hard to sleep; trepidation mixed with excitement was fraying their nerves. An awful lot had happened this past summer. No one had been left unchanged: Draco, Pansy, Theo and Blaise had defied their families and Voldemort. All of them had been disowned, publicly. They were devastated.

They of course had known in theory that such a thing was possible, but none of them had really considered that their parents would actually go through with it. A child may wonder that their Mum and Dad didn't really want them and wished they would just go away, hormonal teenagers worried about such things too. But no one actually believes that their parents will abandon them, willingly. We all believe, deep down, that our parents love us unconditionally and would do anything for us. The four young Slytherins were thrown into an almost catatonic shock when they heard the news. Only a vast amount patience and a renewal of the offer of adoption from Sirius and Remus could bring them out of it.

Theo and Blaise snapped up the offer of a new family immediately and the papers were signed in quick succession. They were now Theo and Blaise Black, and very chuffed with it too. After all, despite everything, the Black Family name was old and prestigious. They hadn't let go of all of their pureblood ideals after all. But nobody had much of a problem with this attitude. Sirius pointed out that if they

wished to be proud of their new name, then it could only be a good thing.

Draco and Pansy had hesitated and were reassured that they didn't have to choose right away. Severus had a sneaking suspicion he knew the cause of their dithering on the subject. He was so sure in fact, that the evening before he and Belle were due to be bonded, he approached them and voiced the wishes they'd been keeping to themselves since the day they arrived.

"Draco, Pansy, Belle and I were wondering if, after we are bonded, you would like us to adopt you, instead of the mutt and his wolf." Severus asked, watching the surprised and happy smiles on the two students' faces. Despite the fact that he got on rather well with the two Marauders, something which sometimes made him wonder if he should check himself into the local funny farm, he still liked to tease them as much as possible. His defence was that a little light derision never hurt anyone and it kept them on their toes.

The two young people had readily accepted and Belle had been overjoyed. Their rather odd bunch of duckies may look weird to any outside observer and probably to some inside ones too, but they were happy and that was all they really needed. Being caught between a rock and hard place, ie, Dumbledore and Voldemort, the closer knit this little group was with other, so much the better.

Over dinner that night, the subject of Dumbledore's behaviour arose. A few people thought he might be under the influence of a third party.

"It just doesn't make sense! He's always been so kind, so generous, and so...well...reasonable. I don't understand why he's been behaving so oddly. Do you think he's under Imperious?" Sirius suggested and everyone looked thoughtful. He went on, "I mean, I saw, along with some of you here, during the last war, he could be....somewhat...ruthless. But never this extreme!" He said, with a deep frown. The young students in the room shrugged, not having seen this side of the Headmaster before.

"I have a few ideas, but I don't have much to go on. His behavioural inconsistencies, and the paranoia point towards some kind of psychosis, but I really don't know enough right now." Hermione had said and they all decided to wait until they knew more. The school would provide them with ample opportunity to do further research.

Harry tossed and turned in his bed, trying not to wake Hermione who appeared to be sleeping soundly beside him.

"Harry, can you not keep still for more than two seconds or something?" She muttered crossly. So, not asleep then.

"Sorry Hermione. I'm just agitated. I can't sleep." Harry complained. Hermione sighed heavily and then got up and put her robe on.

"Come on love. Let's go downstairs and talk for a bit. I don't think either of us is going to get any rest when our minds are buzzing so much." She said and he got up and grabbed his dressing gown, following her from the room.

When they got downstairs, they heard soft voices coming from the kitchen, and as they went in they smiled when they saw Remus, Severus, Belle and Draco already sat at the table with various snacks and cups of tea spread around them.

"Come and join the party!" Draco declared, chuckling a little. Harry and Hermione sat down, helping themselves to some cheesecake and nodding at Belle's offer of tea.

"Couldn't sleep either?" Harry asked them all and they all shook their heads.

"While I realise we could all quaff sleeping potions and nod off quite easily, my lovely wife here suggested it would be better to try and talk about the issues that were worrying me. A week married and already she's nagging me to death." Severus complained with a smile. Belle just blushed and didn't reprimand him.

She'd quietly confessed to Hermione and Pansy that her insides turned to jelly every time Severus called her his wife, and that she had a suspicion, he knew the effect it had on her and used it to his advantage to get away with being cheeky and avoiding a scolding.

"I can't help it, every single time he says it, I want to giggle!" She said morosely.

"Ah, middle aged love!" Declared the two teenagers. Belle scowled.

"Middle aged? Middle aged? Why, I'm only thirty three! You take that back, or I'll...I'll charm your hair neon pink for a week!" She threatened and the two girls yelped, quickly taking back their middle aged comments. Belle had just 'humphed' and crossed her arms. They'd got a few choice glares from the older members of their group over dinner that night and cowered a little, as Belle had obviously shared the middle aged comment with the others. Both girls regularly checked themselves over in the morning to make sure they hadn't woken up sporting strange coloured hair or any extra appendages. None of the adults actually intended to do anything, the threat of punitive action had turned out to be just as effective.

Belle chuckled to herself as she remembered their horrified expressions at the thought of her giving them pink hair. She sat back, cradling her warm cup of tea in her hands and let her mind wander over everything that had happened since she'd found Sirius huddling in that bush, all those weeks ago. She'd certainly been caught in a whirlwind these last few months. And now she was married. The thought of their little wedding brought a satisfied smile to her face, which Severus caught out of the corner of his eye. He knew she was thinking about their bonding again. He looked down at the ring on his left hand, and remembered that day.

Despite the small number of people who would be there, the house had been in a frenzied state of preparation the morning of the bonding. The men were banished into the garden to prepare for the marriage ritual and then to get ready in the family room downstairs. The women claimed the upstairs and did whatever mysterious things

women do to get ready which seem to take endless hours and require an awful lot of squealing and giggling.

After what seemed to be an unreasonable amount of time to the men, everyone was ready and Severus was standing in front of a few rows of chairs, with Draco stoodbeside him, and a very nice woman from the Ministry who'd happily agreed to officiate. Everyone had been pleased that the Ministry of Magic were able to perform the ceremony, as Albus wouldn't be able to dispute that. She'd been rather shocked when she was told which type of bonding they wanted, but had been pleased to inform them that she was capable of performing the powerful ritual.

When Belle walked up the aisle on Sirius' arm, in a simple, yet lovely white dress Severus couldn't help the goofy grin which spread across his face. Later, when he saw the pictures, he grumbled a bit about Gryffindors being a bad influence, but couldn't hide the fact that his breath was taken away at the sight of his bride. The Ministry woman, Celia, began the ceremony when the bride and groom were standing in front of her.

"For an eternity, we are meant to walk these lands. Through the winds, the rains, the turn of the seasons, we all have what we are bound for. Often we gather together, for the wrong reasons. We bury the right ones and blur them so that our path can no longer be seen in the truth and purity of love." She smiled brightly at the couple and then continued.

"Today, we gather to celebrate that purity in its true form. Bringing together this love, we shall honour it with our silent praise and willingness to unify them in both darkness and light, for they shall walk through both."

"Annabelle, turn to your love, your soul and spirit, look into his eyes and speak the following words:

I, Annabelle Black, give to you, my soul and spirit, my own. I profess my eternity to you, and allow you my heart, the most beautiful and precious gift which may be given to another. I give you the rain, my tears, the wind, my whispers, the storm, my kiss. I accept what you are and shall be, and in turn, I accept and wish a thousand lifetimes

with you. Bonded in love and soul, I am." Belle repeated it all in a clear, confident voice, her eyes never leaving Severus'. Celia smiled benignly and then turned to the rather nervous Potions Master.

"Severus, turn to your love, your soul and spirit, look into her eyes and speak the following words:

I, Severus Snape , give to you, my soul and spirit, my own. I profess my eternity to you, and allow you my heart, the most beautiful and precious gift which may be given to another. I give you the rain, my tears, the wind, my whispers, the storm, my kiss. I accept what you are and shall be, and in turn, I accept and wish a thousand lifetimes with you. Bonded in love and soul, I am." His voice was low, but everyone could hear the emotion in his words. Celia motioned towards them.

"Please turn fully towards me, and extend for me your offerings to each other." They did so, and held out their wedding rings.

"I bless these as offerings, symbols to us, that you have been united in love, soul and spirit. Please place your rings on your partner. You are now husband and wife, soul and spirit, may you walk the endless path of existence, arm in arm for all eternity." Belle and Severus turned to each other, holding hands.

"You may now kiss, and give thanks to the gods and goddesses." Celia declared and mumbled a spell as the bride and groom kissed. A blaze of light surrounded them for a few moments and then was gone. As the light faded they parted and gazed at each other for a long moment, and then they turned to their witnesses to be congratulated with cheers and a few whistles.

The party had gone on for hours, and when Belle and Severus left, they'd been subjected to more than a few suggestive comments and nudges. Severus had grouched about it, but it hadn't been able to spoil the good mood of the day. Both of them were nervous about being in the other's arms again, after so many years, but when they did finally come together, it had been as if they'd never been apart. For obvious reasons they hadn't been on a honeymoon but both agreed that they would go once the current crisis was over, whenever that

might be. They didn't really feel the loss of it, as it gave them something to look forward to.

Yet another reason to get through the War alive.

When Severus looked up, his memories leaving him for the moment, he saw that the whole household was now in the kitchen. Seemed everyone was having trouble sleeping tonight. And in all honesty, who could blame them? They all had many a reason why tomorrow would be stressful.

Theo and Blaise were now Theo and Blaise Black, Sirius and Remus' adopted sons and Harry's adopted brothers. That had been a bit of shock when the three of them had worked it out, but surprisingly it made the boys feel more confident and lessened their depression at the abandonment of their families. Blaise, ever the pragmatist, pointed out the plus side to being Harry's brother: "The chicks will be lining up for some private time with their Saviour's brothers. Especially when they realise he's only got eyes for Miss Granger here." He said and Theo grinned and agreed with him.

Severus was worried about what Albus had planned for him. He had thought long and hard and spoken with everyone in the family about his position as a spy. For some reason he had not been called before Voldemort for a long time, which worried him greatly. He decided to speak with the Headmaster when he returned and inform him that with his new responsibilities, he could not continue such a dangerous mission.

Which is probably why the old man had never encouraged him to have a life outside the school before.

Part of Severus' new responsibilities were Draco and Pansy. He'd guessed right when he'd offered them adoption into his family. So, along with a new wife, he now had a son and daughter. For someone who'd thought he'd end his days alone, and at the business end of Voldemort's wand, he suddenly found himself awash with family. He'd honestly thought he would be the last of the Snape line, instead there

were now: Draco Snape, Pansy Snape and Annabelle Snape. It was rather unsettling and he knew it would take him time to adjust.

Draco and Pansy were getting on wonderfully well as brother and sister. Despite the rumours, they'd never thought of each other in a romantic way and had never had a physical relationship. They'd allowed the rumours to continue because if everyone thought she was Draco's, then no one would bother Pansy. They also were delighted at having Annabelle and Severus as their adoptive parents. Somehow, it just hadn't felt right to them to be Sirius and Remus'. This new arrangement suited them nicely, and some of the hurt they'd been suffering was now slowly ebbing away.

Harry and Hermione had their usual problems to worry about, what with Harry being attacked at all turns. Now the young man was worried that Hermione would be even more of a target and had been thinking about breaking it off with her temporarily. Hermione had anticipated this move though and had headed him off.

"Don't you dare try and break up with me for 'my own good' Harry James Black!" She had declared, jabbing her finger into his chest.

"But...you're a target..." He had whimpered a little, rubbing his chest where she'd poked him.

"Don't play dumb Harry! I've always been a target, and even after Moldy Voldy is gone, I'll still be a target! I'm a 'mudblood', remember?" She said crossing her arms and rolling her eyes at him. He smiled a bit sheepishly.

"Well, um, OK." He said, running his hand through his messy hair and shuffling his feet a little.

"You're whipped bro." Theo said as he passed them, not taking his eyes off the magazine in his hands.

"Yeah, and proud of it bro!" Replied Harry, laughing.

Remus and Sirius were concerned with protecting the people in their pack. The urge to look after them, to make sure no harm came to them, was fierce. Some of the wolf's instincts had transferred to Sirius when they'd bonded and so he thought of everyone in their house as their pack, same as Remus, regardless of their surnames.

All in all, everyone was surprised at Dumbledore for agreeing to their terms so easily. It set them all on edge, wondering what he was planning, for to their minds, he was just as big a threat as Voldemort, if not more. After all, they would essentially be staying under his roof. This left them anxious and stressed.

Which may have been what the old man wanted.

Harry watched them all working themselves up with their fears and decided to say something. He stood up and cleared his throat.

"We're not doing ourselves any favours by feeding off each others fears. We will return to face danger tomorrow, we cannot hide from it forever. But we will go together. I have an idea, something I've been thinking about for a little while. How about a Black-Snape family motto?" Harry said, looking around.

"Must you put our names together in that way Black?" Snape protested, and Harry laughed.

"What's the matter Snape? Think you're going to catch some of our awful Gryffindor goody-two-shoes-ness? Are you sure you haven't caught some already, hmm? You've been awfulnice of late you know..." Harry said with a smirk any Slytherin would have been proud of. The others laughed and Severus used his best Professor scowl.

"Of course not Black. Seems you lot are the ones breaking out all Slytherin." He replied and Harry shrugged.

"Oh well, bound to happen sooner or later. Right then, it's a bit old, and a wee bit clichéd, especially as I'm sure I read somewhere that it's the state motto of Kentucky - I'm sure they won't mind if we borrow it. But anyway, I was thinking of something simple: '*iunctus*

nos sto , tribuo nos cado.' Which, before you ask, translates as..." But he was cut off by Remus.

"United we stand, divided we fall.' Though I'm not sure if in the United States that it's usually written in Latin. Very fitting though Harry." He smiled and Harry blushed a little at the praise. He looked at the others.

"Well, what do you think?" He asked a little nervously. They all smiled.

"Eh, I think you're a show off bro." Said Blaise and Theo nodded.

"Yep, me too. You with your swanky Latin words." Theo said and Harry laughed.

"Sounds good to me son." And here the others nodded their agreement. Sirius sat forward excitedly. "Hey, can you put that on the back of these necklaces?" Sirius asked, pulling out his snowflake which had a smooth, solid backing. Hermione spoke up then.

"Ooh, and we should make it a portkey too, and emergency one. It should bring the wearer back here, just in case." She suggested and Harry nodded. Belle had already shown him how to do that.

"Sure thing." Harry replied and muttered a spell. After a few moments everyone's pendants glowed and they all took them out of their clothing to twist them and look at the back. And just as Harry said there the words:

'iunctus nos sto , tribuo nos cado.'

By reminding everyone that they were all in this together, Harry had managed to allay some of the others' worst fears. They'd all been abandoned at one time or another, by their families, or their friends, even the wizarding world. But now, they would always have their family, they would always have each other. The rather soppy moment was broken by Snape.

"Well, I don't know about you lot, but I'm off to bed, before all this overpowering Gryffindor sentimentality makes me want to throw up." He said, and everyone just laughed again. Married with two new

adopted children or not, it was nice to know that some things hadn't changed.

As he was walking upstairs behind the older man, Harry realised something. He was glad Severus could still be the greasy git, it was one of the things that had helped him stay grounded all these years. Snape didn't care how rich or famous Harry was, his respect was earned, and Harry hoped he was well on his way to that. Something must have given him away though, because Snape turned back to him just as he was heading into his and Belle's bedroom.

"Just for your information Black, tonight you gained ten respect points." He said with a smirk. Harry looked confused.

"Huh? Respect points? How many do I have overall?" He asked. Snape's smirk widened.

"Fifty seven." He replied and Harry frowned.

"Hmmm. That's not a lot is it?" He muttered and Snape chuckled low.

"No, it's not. But you're getting there. Considering you started on minus one hundred when I first met you, this is definite progress." He said and he disappeared into his bedroom. The young Gryffindor grumbled about being on minus points before the two of them had even met. He couldn't believe the git actually kept a tally! Idly he wondered how many respect points Sirius was on as he was getting into bed.

"Probably minus one thousand" He thought to himself, and he smiled as he drifted off to sleep.

The next day, Harry got up and quashed the heavy feeling in his stomach. He fingered the pendant which was around his neck, reminding himself of the protections it contained and that it was an emergency portkey back to this house. The password was simple: *'Familia'*, which literally meant 'Family'. They decided to make it in Latin to prevent any accidental activations by choosing too commonplace a word.

After an awful lot of faffing around, and most of it on Sirius' part, they eventually all piled into a couple of muggle taxis (as Belle didn't want to leave her car in King's Cross), along with their trunks and whatnot, and arrived at the train station in good time. Belle paid the cab drivers while the others got some trolleys for them to put their luggage on.

"It's going to be strange riding the train again." Remus said and the other adults nodded.

"Been a long time. I'm just glad I finished all the preparations I needed for this academic year before I came to the house." Severus said as they followed the teenagers along the concourse and towards platforms nine and ten. They got through the barrier without any mishaps but were wholly unprepared for what they encountered on the other side.

The Weasleys spotted them as soon as they appeared and as Harry raised his hand to say hello, the redheaded family turned away from him with pointed glares.

"Hmm...I think in the olden days that was referred to as 'the cut direct'." Sirius said loudly. And the rest of the family offered their own glowers to the Weasleys. Harry looked devastated.

"I wouldn't worry about it Harry. Anyone who rudely ignores your invitation to come and visit them, without any explanation, and who judges you without giving you a chance to tell your side of the story, can't have been that much of a friend in the first place." Hermione said, also at a volume which meant half of the platform heard her.

"Too right Granger. Ignore them bro, if they want to be all pompous and high and mighty just because you did something so heinous as to find a family and some happiness, well then. They're as weasley as their name suggests." Commented Blaise and the others muttered their agreement. Harry felt a little warmth spread through his frozen limbs at the reassurances of his family.

"Good point bro. I had thought they'd be happy for me. But it seems the old man has got to them. Pity." Harry said and with that he led his family right past the now wide eyed Weasleys and onto the train.

Harry didn't feel nearly as nonchalant about the situation as he pretended to be, and after they got settled in a compartment of their own, which Remus charmed so it would be large enough for everybody, he curled up next to Hermione and shed silent tears.

"Hey, Golden Boy, it'll be alright. I know it hurts now, but they'll come around, eh? And if they don't we'll set Moony and Padfoot on them, right?" She said and Harry laughed a little. He sat up and wiped his eyes vigorously, furious with himself for such a display of weakness. He waited for the scathing remarks from the Slytherins, but was shocked when none came. Their expressions were mixtures of concern and anger. Pansy however, was all indignation.

"I can't believe those bastards! What did you do that was so bad? Aren't friends supposed to support each other? They didn't even wait to let you explain, they just jumped off at the deep end! How bloody....Gryffindor!" She declared and slapped a hand over her mouth when she realised she may have offended a few people with her outburst. "Um, Harry...sorry, I..." She began but Harry raised a hand and smiled to show it was OK.

"Nah, no big deal Pans, you're right. It is a very Gryffindor thing to do. I mean, everyone goes on about how brave Gryffindors are, but they don't add that that bravery stems from a rashness of attitude and a tendency to run headlong into things without thinking. Which leads to jumping to conclusions and trying to brazen our way through things when we find out we're wrong. Truly, if Draco here hadn't insulted the first friend I ever made, then I would have been in Slytherin. I'm glad that this year though, I won't be sharing a dormitory with Ron. Seems like he isn't the safest person to be around, anymore." Harry said, and the others accepted the truth of his words. Well, the Slytherins and Belle kind of already knew, especially Snape. But the four Gryffindors had to admit the poorer qualities of their house.

"If he ever was safe to be around that is. Harry, I'm sorry to rub salt into the wound, but it seems to me that the Weasleys befriending you may have been at the old man's suggestion." Draco said and Harry looked stricken.

“Draco...” Warned Severus but the young man interrupted him.

“I’m sorry Sev, but he deserves the truth. Sure, it’s only my opinion, but he should be made aware of the possibility of them being duplicitous. Just in case the Headmaster tells them they should try and get close to him again him, to spy on him or something - he needs to be on his guard around them, and so do we.” Draco said, his eyes showing his very real worry over the situation. Severus nodded and sighed, not wanting to comment.

“It’s going to be hard, but I think we can agree that at the moment, we can only trust other members of the family. I’m sure that quite a few of the other students are perfectly trustworthy, but we’ll have to wait and see. For now...” Whatever it was that Remus was about to say was cut off when the compartment door was slid open and Ron Weasley stepped in.

“Well Potter! Got your own little fan club here hmmm?” He said in a scornful voice and they could hear people behind him snickering.

“That’s original. Didn’t you use that one on him a few years ago Drake?” Pansy asked, and Ron glared at her.

“Yes I did sis. I know, I know, it’s rather weak isn’t it? But I was having a slow week, and I’d run out of inspiration.” Draco replied and everyone laughed.

“What do you want Ron?” Harry asked in a resigned voice. He had hoped he would be able to get through his last year without this type of aggravation, since he’d made up with Draco.

“Who gave you permission to speak Potter? As it happens I’m just here to collect Hermione. Thought she’d like to get it on with a real man for a change.” He said with a leer. He clicked his fingers and gestured impatiently. “Come on Hermione. Get up and come with me.” He demanded.

Sirius, Remus, Belle and Severus sat on the other side of the compartment in shocked disbelief. Surely the youngest Weasley son could not have noticed their presence or he wouldn’t behave this way in front of four adults, one of whom was a teacher. Sirius was going to

interrupt but Snape stopped him. He whispered that it would be much better for him to do something punishable, as long as no one got hurt. The other three nodded, content that they would be able to stop things if they got too far. Theo had been sitting near enough to hear them and quietly passed it onto the others.

They all grinned evilly. Ron of course, noticed and scowled at them.

“What are you all looking so happy about? Hermione, why are you still sitting there with that snake faced scum? Everyone knows he’s evil, come here!” He demanded and snapped his fingers again.

“Why are you clicking your fingers at me Ronald? I’m not a dog you know.” Hermione said, a dangerous glint in her eyes. Harry growled a little at her side.

“Oh really? ‘cause I could’ve sworn you’ve turned into that snake’s bitch!” He yelled and made a lunge for her.

“ENOUGH!” Roared Snape and Ron whimpered and cowered at the sound of his voice.

“Mr Weasley, I am appalled at your behaviour here today, you have not only verbally assaulted two students, but you attempted to attack one of them physically as well. I can only think that you are as mentally incapable as you appear to be, since you have not only attempted this at all, but that you have done it in my presence.” Snape said, his voice low and menacing. Ron clearly hadn’t realised that Snape was there, and he looked ready to wet himself. Snape moved towards the door of the compartment to scold Ron’s accomplices, only to find they’d fled at the sound of his voice.

“Get out of this compartment right now Mr Weasley. I will be informing your Head of House when we arrive. Now go!” He said and the young man leapt up and ran from the room. The others didn’t wait, they burst out laughing immediately and Snape even joined them. Severus sat back down to find the other three adults looking at him warily.

“What?” He prompted and they snickered a bit.

"I am SO glad I didn't have you as a teacher." Sirius said, Remus and Belle nodding their agreement.

"Oh come on, you've got to admit that was vastly amusing." Snape said and then they laughed in earnest.

Harry looked out the window once the commotion died down. His heart was heavy. He didn't understand why Ron had suddenly turned against him. He wondered if Draco was right in his theory that Dumbledore was not only behind this recent change in attitude, but that he was the reason they had befriended him in the first place. It was all so complicated. Plans within plans, tricks within tricks. He felt Hermione slip her hand in his, and he smiled. At least now he had his family, people he could rely on. With them by his side, he felt he could conquer the world.

Or defeat probably the most evil man to walk the face of the earth.

"lunctus nos sto , tribuo nos cado." He whispered to himself.

Chapter Seventeen – Where the Summer's Happenings are Revealed

“Ford, you're turning into a penguin. Stop it.”

Douglas Adams (1952 - 2001), *Arthur Dent in The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

Harry was a bundle of mixed emotions as he followed his family to the waiting carriages. He stared out the window as he contemplated on how he was feeling right now. So many changes had occurred over the summer and he didn't feel like the same person that he was before. Coming back to Hogwarts, he felt like his life had turned full circle. He felt stronger, more ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead. But at the same time, he felt touched with sorrow.

People he thought he knew now turned out to be completely different. He found it hard to believe that all the Weasleys had befriended him just on the old man's orders. Ron simply wasn't that good an actor, and Ginny, well. Who knew? Something told him that he'd earned her friendship after saving her life in her first year. And the twins? Could they really be so barefaced as to smile while they took his money and then laugh behind his back? He didn't think so. Perhaps Dumbledore had planted this idea to throw him off. It was all so confusing. He would have to talk to them, he decided. But how to approach them?

He thought it would be best to try the twins first. They'd bought themselves a site in Hogsmeade to set up a new shop, and something told him they would be more understanding than Ron right now. He would speak with the others and see what they thought.

During his introspection, Hermione and his family had flicked worried glances in his direction. They could easily guess what was bothering him, but didn't press him to talk about it just then. They knew he would come to them in his own time, and they also knew this was the best way for him.

The carriage jolted as they arrived at the school and they all took a collective breath before they opened the door.

“Well, here goes nothing.” Muttered Sirius and went out first. The others followed him and they stared up at the castle for a few moments, waiting for the Snapes to join them – their carriage was right behind the Blacks’. Professor Snape and his family joined them silently and looked up as well, wondering what the six of them were staring at. Severus leaned close to Sirius.

“You know, it’s not going to turn pink if you keep staring at it.” He murmured and Sirius jumped forward with a yelp.

“Severus, don’t bloody...you...well...fuck...just don’t!” He said, scowling and breathing hard, a hand over his heart in fright. Snape chuckled and walked forwards, Belle, Draco and Pansy behind him. Sirius’ own family offered him sympathetic smiles with varying degrees of sincerity. Theo and Blaise had thought it was quite amusing. Remus put an arm round him and gently guided him into the castle.

They ignored the curious stares they were receiving from the new and returning students and made their way towards the Great Hall. Minerva was there, waiting for the first years, and she welcomed them with a smile.

“Good Evening, Albus told me to expect you and your family Harry, welcome back dear boy.” She said and Harry smiled genuinely at her. It wasn’t her fault that she was so loyal to the Headmaster. It was her duty after all, and she’d fought for Harry and his wishes to leave the Dursleys over the years, just not with very much success.

“Thank you Professor McGonagall, good to see you.” He replied and the others echoed the sentiment. Snape stepped forward.

“Minerva, are you and the Headmaster aware of the changes in circumstances among us here?” He asked and she nodded slowly, a slight frown.

“Ah, I understand, that Mr Potter is Mr Black now, as he announced at the meeting? As is Mr Lupin and Miss Roxbury is now Miss Black?”

She replied in a slightly hesitant tone, using the surname Belle had attended the school under. She saw no point in drawing attention to the young woman's connection to You-Know-Who. Snape shook his head and raised an eyebrow at Sirius, indicating for him to go first.

"There's been a few happenings since then Minny." Padfoot said and she scowled at the nickname and his cheeky smile.

"Really Mr Black?" She said and was surprised when five people replied.

"Yep!" Came from the five Black Family males. She looked even more confused. Severus repressed another chuckle.

"Why don't I just fill you in, and then we can decide when and if to inform the rest of the school? You know about Remus, Sirius and Harry of course. Their family now includes Theodore and Blaise, as they were adopted after their defection from their parents. So they too are now both Mr Black. Draco and Pansy here also defected, and are now Mr Snape and Miss Snape, as they graciously accepted mine and my wife's offer to join our family." He said smirking a little at the Deputy Headmistress' look of shock at the word 'wife'.

"Your wife, Severus?" She asked and her eyes immediately flicked to Belle. The Potions Master caught her glance and smiled.

"Yes, Miss Black is now Mrs Snape, as we were bonded over the summer. I'm sorry you weren't invited old friend, it would have been good to have you there." He said, honestly. She blinked at him a few times, her eyes wide, and then she smiled.

"I understand Severus. Congratulations old friend. I'm very happy for you, for all of you in fact. In these Dark Times, well. This is the sort of thing that gives a person hope. As for telling the rest of the school, it's up to you. Hogwarts being what it is though, everyone will find out sooner or later." Minerva said and they all shrugged, she was right about the grape vine in the school. It was only a matter of time before it came out.

"Minerva's right. I vote we announce it tonight, at least that way we can present it on our own terms, make the facts plain before the

twisting begins. I have no doubt that this whole thing will be twisted out of all recognition once the press gets hold of it, so we should be prepared for that. There is one other thing which gives the idea merit however.” Remus said and he turned to look at the Slytherin Housemaster. “Severus, if we announce it tonight, then your cover will be blown and there is no way the old, ahem, the Headmaster can force you to continue your current assignment. It would be pointless.” He said with a serious look in his eyes. Severus knew exactly what the wolf meant, he had been thinking of that very thing.

“We had better get moving, as I think the munchkins are about to arrive. All those in favour of telling everyone tonight, raise your hand.” Said Sirius. Minerva was impressed at the seemingly democratic means of making decisions this odd little group displayed. Though with all of them living in such close proximity, it most likely had prevented many domestic disagreements.

The vote was unanimous; they would let everyone know about the two new families at the welcoming feast. They would face it all together and the rest of the school be damned. They didn’t think it would go down too well at first, but after a little while something else would come along that would be more interesting. They had all put up with vicious gossip before, so they had some idea what to expect.

“One last thing.” Began McGonagall, as they made their way to the doors. They all stopped and waited. “Dobby, the house elf you sent ahead, has already been shown to your new suite with your luggage, by the other elves. I must say he was rather enthusiastic about setting your new rooms up. He will meet you after the feast to show you where they are. Now, given your new...situations, some adjustments will need to be made to accommodate you all, but he will be able to make them for you. The Hogwarts house elves will assist too. Severus, will you be staying in the new suite, or will you keep your dungeon quarters?” She asked and he thought about it for a moment.

“I will keep my office, lab and classroom in the dungeons but I will make my living quarters with the others. We’ll work out a system for the students in my house to contact me.” He decided and she nodded. They could all hear the chatter of the new firsties as they wandered

up the stairs, so they said goodbye to the Head of Gryffindor, and made their way into the Hall.

There were more than a few curious stares as they walked into the Hall, but most of the students were too excited to see their friends and quickly turned away to hear about each other's summers. They got a few intrigued glances and more than one glare from the Staff Table and the Gryffindor Table, but they ignored them as best they could. They paused as a group, unsure of where to sit, and looked around.

Harry and Hermione were obliged to sit with their house, as were the others. Snape was obligated to sit with the other teachers, which just left the three adults. They looked up and saw Dumbledore beckoning them and they tried to hide their surprise. Belle, Sirius and Remus followed Severus and sat in the empty seats next to him, feeling the suddenly interested looks of the students that had just dismissed them as unimportant.

"Ah, so good to see you all here. Severus, Sirius, Remus, Miss Riddle." Dumbledore said and Belle flinched at the name.

"Actually, Professor Dumbledore, that's not my name. You will recall, as I have told you several times, that it has not been my name for twenty years." She said, causing him to narrow his eyes at her for a moment. She felt a featherlike touch on her mind which bounced off her defences. She knew he could easily break in if he wanted to, in fact, she sometimes wished he would. He could then probe her mind and find that she wasn't evil. But he never did, and she often wondered why. She was starting to think he didn't want to find her innocent. It was rather unnerving.

"Well, regardless, I find myself in some difficulty." He began, having decided on a brilliant idea which would help him keep an eye on them all.

"And what is that, Headmaster?" Snape asked, eyeing him warily.

"The young woman who was to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts this year, has summarily fled to America, too afraid of Tom to remain.

So I need someone to fill the post. It occurred to me that it might not be as difficult as I had thought. When you all walked in it reminded me that we have four people, perfectly qualified and able to teach the subject. Here is what I propose: Miss Riddle, Mr Black and Mr Black could take on the job, between them they have a fair amount of experience. Or, Miss Riddle could take over Potions, as I know she has a Masters in it, and you three could teach Defence. I know this is what you have wanted for some time, Severus.” He suggested and the four of them looked shocked.

“What is he up to?” They all thought simultaneously. Albus smiled and waited. They all looked at each other. After nods from the other three, Severus spoke for them.

“We accept. It will be a welcome change and I would enjoy instructing the students on proper Defence. However, there is one condition: I will not return to my assignment with the Dark Lord. I fear recent developments have made that impossible anyway.” He said and Dumbledore frowned.

“Recent developments, Severus?” He pressed and for a moment Snape was struck at the similarity between Voldemort and Dumbledore.

“Yes Headmaster. Miss Black is now Mrs Snape, my wife. And after four of my Slytherins were rescued by Harry and his family, I adopted two of them – Draco and Pansy. If I were to return, I would be killed, eventually.” He said, the last word coming out in a deadly tone. Albus seemed to consider it for a few moments. Suddenly everyone’s attention was drawn to the large double doors, as McGonagall and the first years entered. Dumbledore watched them for a few moments and then leaned towards the four of them over McGonagall’s empty chair.

“Very well, agreed. Congratulations.” He muttered, before turning back to the Sorting. Severus bent his head down to whisper to his wife.

“A Potions Masters my dear? Are you trying to outdo me, hmm?” He murmured and she shuddered a little at the feel of his warm breath on her neck.

"No, darling. I don't need to try to outdo you. I already have." She smiled and he chuckled. She went on. "The way you used to talk about them, the books you had at the house, the journals and everything. It just piqued my interest. I was a fairish brewer at school, but I was more interested in avoiding any attention, so I never really applied myself. Beyond what was necessary, of course. Then when I met you, you inspired me to be all that I could be, after I left, I sought out a Master and began my Apprenticeship." She explained and he nodded.

"Who did you study under?" He asked as he listened to the racket that infernal Hat called a song.

"Keishi Arakida. He spoke very highly of you." She replied and he raised his eyebrows.

"Japan? You left me and went all the way to Japan?" He said and she felt his surprise and disappointment through the bond. She was going to say something, but then she felt regret and sympathy replace the hurt. "You really did want to get as far away as possible from him, didn't you? Despite everything, you weren't running from me, were you?" He said and she shook her head. He smiled a little and took her hand, offering silent support as the Sorting Hat got to the last verse.

"So here we are, all gathered here,

For yet another year.

Please listen now, and do not scowl,

This warning you must hear.

The Darkness comes, to end us all,

United we stand, divided we fall."

The two new families gasped along with the rest of the Hall at the finality of its words. They glanced at each other worriedly until they saw Harry smiling at the Hat. They all knew of his strange kinship with the Hat, it had been his ancestor Godric Gryffindor's hat after all. It'd obviously found out about the family motto somehow, and decided it would be a good sentiment for the whole school.

After the Sorting, they all tucked into the feast, and made fairly light conversation with the members of their houses. All of the younger generation of the family deflected questions about their summer with vague answers, knowing that they would be interrogated thoroughly after the announcement. Once all the plates had been cleared away, Dumbledore stood up to give his notices.

"Now we are all well fed, I have a few start of term notices to give out. The Forbidden Forest remains so: Forbidden, and we would all do well to remember this. Mr Filch, our caretaker would like me to remind you that no magic is to be used in the corridors, between lessons. There is also a list of banned items, which includes anything and everything from Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. A full list is pinned to the door of his office, if you would like to consult it. I would imagine you have noticed some new faces at the Staff Table tonight. There have been a few changes regarding the teachers. So, from now on, Potions will not be taught by Professor Snape, but by his wife, Professor Snape." He said and the students looked on in confusion until Annabelle stood up and nodded. When she sat down again a few whispers could be heard.

"Snape's got a wife? Who would be dumb enough to marry him?"

"Poor woman, married to that greasy bastard!"

The staff couldn't hear the specific words, but got the general gist of it. Harry and the others however could hear every word and proceeded to glare at the culprits, murderously. Which startled a few people.

"Since when does Harry Potter stand up for Snape?" They murmured, but Harry ignored them. He was currently engaged in a staring match with Ron.

“Ahem, yes well. Moving on, Defence Against the Dark Arts will now be taught by Professor Snape, Professor Black and Professor Black.” Dumbledore continued and again the students were confused. They began to wonder if he was going dotty in his old age. “Now, before you ask, I should clarify. Professor Annabelle Snape will be teaching Potions. Professor Severus Snape, Professor Sirius Black and Professor Remus Black will be teaching Defence. Does everyone understand?” He asked, his eyes twinkling.

Utter silence filled the hall, Harry could’ve sworn he could hear crickets. He stood up.

“While we’re at it, and you’re all sitting so quietly, I have an announcement to make too. I’ve had quite the summer, I can tell you.” He began and Severus glowered at him.

“Going to get to the point any time soon Harry?” He complained and Harry laughed.

“Not if you keep interrupting me Professor!” He shot back and Snape smirked. The students were taken aback, as were many of the staff. No one had dared to speak to the snarky git like that before. What was even more surprising was that he seemed to get away with it too.

“Anyway, as I was saying, I am no longer Harry Potter. I am sure you will all congratulate me when I tell you I am now Harry Black, having been adopted by my Godfather and his husband as their son. But that’s not all, oh no. I have two new brothers as well.” At this he turned to the Slytherin table and waved. “Eh, stand up lads!” He said. The two Slytherins groaned, but did stand.

“There they are, Blaise and Theo Black. Their family abandoned them when they refused to serve Voldemort. I can assure you they are not Marked. Give us a wave guys!” He said and they laughed and complied, rolling up their sleeves to show their bare forearms. A few of the students laughed too, but not unkindly. “Thanks mates, you can sit down now. Right, where was I? Oh yes, well you already know about our former Potions Professor’s good fortune in marrying my aunt, the lovely young lady up there who used to be Annabelle Black. But there’s more! I have two new cousins now as well, and there they

are..." He said as he saw Draco and Pansy, having anticipated his next words, were already standing up.

"Draco and Pansy Snape. And look, they're already waving! Unfortunately they too were condemned by their birth families for their defiance to Voldemort. As you can see neither of them are Marked" He said, surprised at himself for his behaviour. He'd never normally do something like this in a million years. He'd always been too shy before. He decided his Dad's personality was rubbing off on him. A quick glance at the staff table showed Sirius fighting hard to stop himself from bursting into hysterics.

"So, thank you Headmaster for indulging me enough to make my little announcement, I do appreciate it. All that is left for me to say, is this: these people are my family, and I love them. Please treat them all with the respect and dignity they deserve." *Or else.* The last part was not spoken aloud, but it was there, hanging in the silence. Harry sat down and the students paused for a moment, and then burst into a round of applause. He smiled shyly at the attention and shuffled a little closer to Hermione.

"I hope no one minded me usurping the right to tell everyone." He said and she smiled.

"I'm sure they didn't Harry, I mean..." She began but she was cut off by a snarl from Ron Weasley.

"Well, well, well. Siding with mudbloods and Slytherins are we now Black? And I thought you could stoop no lower." He growled and Harry briefly wondered if Ron knew how much he sounded like Lucius Malfoy. Except the part about Slytherins anyway.

"Excuse me Ron? I hope, for your sake, you are not referring to my girlfriend, Hermione, as a mudblood?" Harry replied in a deceptively mild tone.

"And what if I am, Black? What you going to do? Set your mangy Dad on me?" Ron spat. Harry bristled.

“Well, I don’t know Ron. There’s so many options to choose from, frankly, between you and me? It’s hard to decide. Let’s see...” He began, counting them off on his fingers.

“I could let Sirius and Remus at you, they could do a fair amount of damage. Or there’s always Hermione here, you know how scary her hexes are. But then, my brothers are also looking for a bit of fun. With their creativity and Slytherin cunning I’m sure they could come up with something rather original, and they’re generous enough to let Draco and Pansy join in too. Or there’s always Auntie Belle, Professor Snape’s wife. She’d probably ask her husband for advice on how to punish you. So, do you see my problem now? Just who do I turn you over to?” Harry mused and looked at Ron. He was whiter than white, with a green tinge around the edges.

Harry snapped his fingers and everyone around him jumped, apart from Hermione, she just snickered at their reaction.

“I’ve got it, it’s perfect! I’ll truss you up like a pig and give you over to Dobby. Little guy deserves a treat after all the hard work he’s been doing.” Harry said with a wide grin. Ron slid off the bench, his eyes rolling up into the back of his head. There was a dull thud as he hit the floor. Hermione cracked up and started to chortle in earnest. Neville leaned over, his eyes wide.

“Harry...you’re scary! That was, w-w-well...great!” He said and Harry smiled. Noticing that no one seemed to be in any hurry to help Ron, not even Ginny. She was having a conversation with Lavender and Parvati that seemed to involve a lot of giggling.

“Thanks Neville.” He replied and Hermione gave him a look. “Oh, yes, I forgot to ask. Neville, can I have your permission to speak to Professor Snape – not the male one, the other one – about you? Maybe she can help you with Potions? She’s nothing like her husband, I assure you.” He said and Neville smiled a little tremulously, hope in his eyes.

“Um, OK Harry, if you think it’s a good idea.” He replied and Harry nodded. Hermione pat the young aspiring botanist on the arm.

“Trust us Neville, she’s really nice. She’ll be able to help, I promise.” Hermione said and the young man relaxed. If Harry and Hermione thought it was a good idea, then it must be.

“Thanks you two. I had given up hope of passing this year, and I really need my Potions NEWT. It’s good to see you guys, and I’m glad you finally got together.” Neville said and they both blushed.

“So are we Nev, so are we.” Harry replied.

Chapter Eighteen – Where A Surprise is Waits for the Young Serpent

“There is a theory which states that if ever anybody discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable. There is another theory which states that this has already happened.”

Douglas Adams (1952 – 2001) *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

The rest of the Welcoming Feast passed fairly quietly, Ron seemed to have been suitably cowed by Harry's threat to set his family on him. Encouraged by the fact that, despite the change in name, Harry still appeared to be the same guy, the other Gryffindors were reasonably friendly. It didn't stop him feeling glad that he wouldn't be staying in the Tower any more though; he was looking forward to seeing their new rooms.

When Hermione and Harry had finished eating, they looked up to see various family members making their way towards the Entrance Hall. They got up and filed out, along with everyone else and waited off to one side for the others to join them. A *crack* announced Dobby's arrival and the little elf was bouncing around in excitement to show them to their suite.

“Mr Harry Black Sir, you is loving the new room! Dobby has seen it! Yes he has sir!” He said, jumping up and down, his big ears flapping with the movement. Harry just laughed and tried to curb some of the little guy's exuberance. The four Slytherins joined them and chuckled at Harry's unsuccessful attempts to get his house elf to calm down. Dobby was yanking on Harry's robes as the four adults emerged from the crowd now pouring out of the Great Hall.

“Well now, we're all here, we'd better get going! Dobby! Lead the way, if you will!” Harry declared and Dobby squealed with delight and bounded off up the stairs. He waited impatiently at the top for them to catch up with him as they'd decided to follow at a less vigorous pace.

They didn't have to go far, as seeing as Severus was Head of Slytherin, they'd been given rooms on the second floor. Dobby stopped at a portrait of a King Cobra who was currently resting its head on a rock. The picture showed a babbling brook, teeming with plants and wildlife. The majestic snake looked rather content as it reclined half in and half out of the water. Harry and Belle stepped forward.

"Greetings Great One. We are honoured that you will guard the way to our home." Hissed Belle and Harry nodded. The snake reared its head for a moment and Sirius began to shake a little.

"Speakers? Two Speakers? I must call my Master!" The cobra replied and then it hissed a summons which couldn't be translated and they waited for a few moments.

"Forgive my rudeness Speakers. Thank you for your kind words. My Master comes so he might greet you. It has been a long time since we had other Speakers in this castle. Ah, Master is here." The snake hissed and Harry and Belle looked at each other, confused.

"Um, guys? What's going on? Are we going to go in or what?" Asked Sirius, his phobia wanting to put as much distance between himself and the hissing as possible.

"I'm not sure." Replied Harry, frowning. Belle shrugged as well.

"He said his Master wanted to meet us, but...Oh. My. God..." She said, her eyes going wide in shock when she looked back at the portrait. There, a big smile on his face, was her ultimate ancestor: Salazar Slytherin.

"Well, well. Two Speakers! Such a shock! Ah, Severus, so nice to be able to speak to you finally. The current Headmaster has done a good job in tucking me away. Not really been much cause to break out, so to speak, until now. I must say, you are doing a fine job in shepherding my House. So! How is everyone, hmm?" He asked, smiling broadly at them all.

“Oh my, nothing small happens around you brother, does it? I do believe this year will turn out to be rather surprising. Don’t you Professor?” Blaise said, smirking at Snape who was just standing there, all expression leached from his face. Those that knew him however, understood it for the display of extreme shock it was.

“Are you really Salazar Slytherin?” Belle asked in an awed voice, not caring how daft she sounded. The others waited with baited breath.

“Yes I am, young lady. And who are you? Strange...there’s something familiar...” He studied her for a moment, and then, remembering the connection so did the rest of the little group. There was, like Salazar had said, something there. Perhaps something round the eyes...

“Forgive me for being rude. This is just a bit of a shock. You see, my Father, was Tom Riddle, your heir...” Belle spoke in Parseltongue without even realising it. Salazar looked thoughtful for a moment, and then he too spoke in the language of snakes.

“Well my dear child! It is nice to meet you. Though I am a portrait, the real Salazar Slytherin did leave some of his essence in me, so I am more than I appear to be. I know of the current crisis and I am surprised that the one who is in charge of the school has not sought my counsel. It is no matter, however, now that you are here.” Belle nodded and then the Founder turned to Harry.

“Young Serpent, you know of your task. I am pleased to see you have gathered those who will support and help you. That is always the mistake evil makes – to be alone, to have no one beside them. My Heir made a dreadful error when he murdered his love, though he does not realise this. You must return to the Chamber, there is more to be discovered. I left some...items which may assist you. Please, look as soon as you can. Time is of the essence.” He said and Harry smiled.

“Thanks Salazar. I will do as you ask.” He said and the man in the portrait nodded, stroking the head of his cobra.

“Zeke and I will happily guard the entrance to your rooms, we will make sure none pass who are not welcome. Now, what is the password?” He asked and they looked at each other.

“*Venenum Sceptum*” Said Harry with a smirk. Salazar raised his eyebrows for a moment and then burst out laughing.

“Potions Rule’? Very well young serpent!” He replied and then the portrait door swung open. The others paused and then laughing as well, they followed the surprising young man in through the door.

When the door shut behind them they all stopped looking round in awe. They were currently standing in a vestibule of sorts, which led into the main room. As they gazed at their astonishing suite, they couldn’t help thinking that Dumbledore was trying to butter them up a little.

On the right hand side was a grand brick and marble fireplace, with a healthy blaze already roaring in the grate. The room was very big and on the wall opposite the door was a large staircase, leading to a gallery of sorts. Off this were various wooden doors. There were more doors on the ground floor, yet no one’s attention was on these right now. For in each corner of the room was a large, leafy tree. Their branches stretched up and out over the high ceiling, which had a glass roof, showing the starry night sky. There was also a huge window on the left hand side, showing a view over the lake. They had to be enchanted because considering where they were in the castle, their rooms would not have normally afforded such a view from the window or the ceiling.

They walked in slowly, their heads twisting this way and that, trying to take it all in.

“Wow!” Said Remus, and the others murmured their agreement.

“Wow indeed, wolf.” Severus replied and Remus smiled at him. Everyone else chuckled and started to explore the rooms.

The downstairs yielded a kitchenette, where Dobby strictly informed them he would be preparing food if they needed it and that they

weren't to invade his domain. There was also a study room, dining room and a room which looked like it had been set up for some kind of physical and magical training. After checking all this out they hurried upstairs to try and find their bedrooms.

The task was made a lot simpler, by the fact that their names were inscribed on the doors in silver lettering. It made a nice contrast to the dark wood. Sirius surprised no one when he opened the door in his room, ran right in, and started jumping up and down on the bed.

“Woo hoo! Come on Moony! I challenge you to a pillow fight!” He yelled, chucking one of the fluffy pillows from the four poster at him. Remus just rolled his eyes at his husband affectionately. Severus and Belle were passing, looking for their room and the two of them shook their heads at the new Defence Professor's childishness, but didn't make any scathing comments.

When they found the door with their names on they made their way in curiously and looked around. Shutting the door, they stopped took in their new abode. It was simple, yet elegant. The arrangements were similar to the other bedrooms they'd seen, a large four poster, a nice thick carpet, two great big wardrobes, and an en suite bathroom. What was different from the other two Professor's room, was that there was a lovely dressing table for Belle and a little private study, clearly whoever designed the room knew that Severus would prefer it that way.

“I wonder how much of this was Albus' work and how much was Hogwarts herself, Harry has always been one of her favourites.” Severus mused and Belle shrugged. He turned to look at her curiously. “Or perhaps it's both of you dear wife? Two descendants of the Founders now living at the school, hmmm....it's got to make some sort of difference.” He said and she shrugged again.

“I don't know husband. It could be a combination of several factors. Whatever it is, I'm certainly grateful. I had forgotten the beauty and graciousness of this castle. It is wonderful to be able to see it again. There's just something about Hogwarts' magic, it supports and it lifts the spirit somehow, do you know what I mean?” She said as she

went to sit at the dressing table, absently picking up her hairbrush. Her things had already been placed there. Severus moved to stand behind her, taking the brush from her and working it through her hair himself. It still surprised her that he did things like that, even though he'd done it during their previous relationship. He claimed he found it soothing, as did she, so she didn't complain.

"I understand Annabelle. It certainly helps to calm my black Deatheater's heart." He said with a rueful smile. There was a knock at the door and they both called 'Come in'. Harry popped his head in and smiled at the domestic scene they portrayed. He didn't comment though, knowing that neither Professor Snape would appreciate it.

"Hello Severus, Auntie Belle. Hey that's a good point, since you married my Father's sister, can I call you Uncle Severus? Or better yet, Uncle Sev?" Harry asked with a cheeky grin. Snape didn't look up from what he was doing, but smiled a little.

"Not if you value your life Harry. When we are in lessons, you must call me Professor, however, when we are in these type of situations, in our family rooms away from the rest of the school, you are welcome to call me Severus, as you have already been. Good enough?" He asked and Harry nodded.

"Come on then! Family Meet the lounge. Hurry up! Times-a-wasting!" He declared and then he saluted them and shut the door again.

"That young man has spent far too much time with his Father." Belle said and her husband grunted in agreement. He put down the brush and took a step back so she could rise. She stopped him before he turned to the door, and smiled at him.

"You know, I never thought, when I picked up that poor, injured animal and took him into my home, that it would lead me back to you. With everything that's been happening, I haven't had a chance to simply sit and take stock. But now that I do, I really can't believe that I'm here, and that I'm your wife." She said and he smiled. Before he could comment though, she continued.

"When we met, I had the usual fantasies of a big, lavish wedding, hoards of children, you know, the works. I was still really young and I

didn't understand that life rarely happens that way. I was always looking for answers, for the time that everything would make sense. But it doesn't, does it?" She paused again and he shook his head, his gaze intent on her, his eyes not leaving hers.

"I don't really know where I'm going with this. I suppose, I just realised something. You have to carry on with life. I've been hiding for so long, waiting for the time he would be gone and I could live again. But what I didn't see, was that by doing that, it was as if he'd already won. I ran from you because I was afraid of what you might do if you knew. I thought, at the time, that it was because you might try and use me to raise him, in some horrible way. But looking back, I think there was also a part of me that was scared you wouldn't care." She explained and he frowned.

"I don't understand love. Why were you afraid I wouldn't care?" He pressed and she sighed.

"I think a small part of me was terrified at how strongly I felt about you. There was only ever you, you know, and the intensity of it all was overwhelming." She looked down and he put a finger under her chin to raise her eyes to meet his again.

"I believe I know what you mean. For someone who has not come from a loving background, those kind of intense feelings can literally produce a physical shock reaction sometimes. I was scared too you know Belle. I think we should agree, that from now on, we'll be honest with each other. Things have been moving very quickly, quicker than either of us would like. So now we have the chance, we should take it slowly a bit. Agreed?" He said and she smiled. She leaned in to kiss him lingeringly. When she pulled away she rested her face in his neck, breathing his scent in deeply.

"Agreed." She replied.

When they emerged from their room and made their way downstairs, they found the others waiting for them, stretched out on the enormous sofas in front of the fire. There were a couple of big armchairs too and they took the free one, Severus promptly placing his wife in his lap.

He couldn't help but be shocked with himself for his recent behaviour. He was so far from the angry, sarcastic bastard he used to be, that sometimes he wasn't sure who he was anymore. Well, apart from the sarcasm, that was. He still had that, thank Merlin. Though looking round the room, he didn't think he was the only one suffering with this particular ailment. One thing was for certain though, these would prove to be interesting times. Harry cleared his throat. By some bizarre unspoken agreement, the young man had been elected The Boss. Something he was unsure as to whether Harry was happy about or not.

"OK, hello Family. Here we all are. Is everyone happy with their rooms?" He began and they all chimed in with 'yeah'. Harry smiled. "Good." He continued. "Any problems need fixing?" He asked, looking round the room, pleased to see everyone shaking their heads.

"Grand. Alright then, tomorrow, lessons begin. I know it goes without saying that all four of our Professors will treat us exactly the same as the other students, and will treat all four houses..." Here there was a pointed look in Severus' direction – the former Potions Professor snorted but didn't comment. "...equally and award or deduct house points in a fair and honest way. As for us students, we will not expect any special treatment in class, right?" He declared and they all nodded a bit sullenly, but ruined the sulky looks by grinning a little.

"Fantastic. Well then, couple of other things I need to tell you. Salazar told me earlier that his Heir – and by this I assume he means Voldemort – made a grievous error by murdering his love – and sorry Auntie Belle, but I take that to mean your Mother. He said that evil always makes the mistake of believing it can make it on its own. He said that our strength lies in supporting and helping each other. He also told me that some of the original Founder's essence lies in him and that he's not a normal portrait." Harry explained and their little group looked thoughtful.

"So, do you think he's hinting that he can help us? After all, we all know that portraits are a memory of the person at the time they were painted, nothing more. Perhaps as he has some of Salazar's essence he can do more than the others." Hermione said and there were a few murmurs.

"I don't know Hermione, but I think you're right. One more thing, he told me to go back to the Chamber of Secrets. Said there was something there that might help." Harry told them, and they all appeared to be considering it.

"Well, it's still possibly dangerous, but we should check it out. I vote Belle, Severus, Hermione, Harry and Draco go. Between you all, you should be able to handle anything that comes along. The rest of us can stay here and keep an eye on things, possibly keep the old man busy with a few pranks. That reminds me, Dobby!" Sirius called and the little elf popped into view.

"Yes Master Sirius Sir! How is Dobby helping?" He said in his squeaky voice. Sirius smiled at him.

"Hi Dobby. You really don't need to call me Master you know. Anyway, did you check this room for listening charms and devices earlier?" He said and the house elf bounced up and down.

"Oh yes! There was one in every room! Dobby took them down, Hogwarts helped. She was not very pleased that they was there." Dobby replied a slightly fierce look in his eyes.

"Good thinking Dad. Though I imagine Severus did a sweep as he stepped into the room. Right?" Theo said and Severus smirked.

"Naturally." He replied. Blaise smirked too.

"Nice to know some things never change." He said, and with the chuckles that accompanied that comment, the meeting broke up and everyone retired to their rooms.

Tomorrow after all, was bound to be a long, long day.

Chapter Nineteen – Where the Final Year Begins

“If we were to wake up some morning and find that everyone was the same race, creed and colour, we would find some other cause for prejudice by noon.”

George Aiken

Harry couldn't sleep. His nightmares had returned now that he was back at Hogwarts. They weren't visions sent by Voldemort, thank Merlin, they were in fact products of his own turbulent subconscious. He sighed as he got up and out of bed, deciding that he may as well go and have a nice hot drink to calm himself. He really didn't want to overuse potions, especially Dreamless Sleep, as he didn't want to get addicted. He moved as silently as possible so as not to wake Hermione. Despite the fact that she had her own room, she'd followed him to his, and bluntly told him she would be spending the night there. He found her presence comforting however, so he didn't protest. He stopped as he reached the door to let his gaze wander over her sleeping form.

Hermione.

She was so beautiful, lying there, snoring softly. Even though there was little bit of drool which was escaping out of the corner of her mouth. That just made her more real, more normal. They, like Belle and Severus, were taking things slow in their relationship. They shared a bed, but had not slept together, or done much more than kiss and cuddle.

Neither of them wanted to rush, as it would be both of their first times. Harry had never let himself get close enough to anyone before, and Hermione had wanted to wait until she had a real connection with someone. Now her and Harry were together, she wanted to build their relationship up, until that connection was solid. He had no problem agreeing to this, and he believed it would be worth the wait in the end.

He softly shut the door and made his way quietly downstairs to the living room. A slight movement near the window alerted him to someone else's presence, and he extended his senses to try and see who it was. The magical signature sent back to him made him smile. He walked over.

"Sirius?" He called softly so as not to startle him. His adoptive Father turned to smile at him, eyes unreadable in the darkness.

"Hey, Harry. Come sit." He replied, just as softly.

"Thanks." Harry said as he sat down next to the older man, moving some cushions on the window seat.

"So, can't sleep either?" Harry asked and Sirius sighed, shaking his head. "Nightmares?" Harry asserted and he was answered by a nod. "Deatheaters?" Harry guessed and Sirius nodded again. "Me too." He told him and he felt his Dad's arms go round him, offering and asking for mutual comfort.

"Room for one more gentlemen?" Came a soft, silky voice. The two men hugging jumped slightly, but weren't overly alarmed as they recognised the voice. They turned to regard its owner and wordlessly held out their arms to him. He sighed, muttering and sat down. The three of them didn't say anything to each other, they didn't need to. They were all feeling rather awkward with this display of affection, even if it was what they needed right then.

After a few moments they broke apart and moved away from each other slightly. No one could meet the others eyes, and they shifted around on their cushions uncomfortably.

"How did you do it?" Harry suddenly asked, looking at his former Potions Professor, the former spy for the Order.

"Hmmm? Do what? Keep going back?" Severus asked, glad to have something to talk about, even if it was unpleasant. His mind was still reeling from the fact that he'd just had a three way hug with Sirius and Harry Black. Even though they'd all lived as family for the last few weeks, it was a rather large shock to the system. He was changing. Hell! They all were, and none more so than Harry. Though

Severus did privately wonder if this young man he saw before him, was who Harry had been the whole time. He, and everyone else, had been blind. Or looking at him with blinkers on, not being able to see his true nature. He turned back to Harry, realising he was waiting patiently for an answer.

"Why did I keep going back?" He asked himself. The answer was complicated.

"Well, it wasn't because I thought I was paying for my previous crimes. Actually, I suppose part of it was. When the Dark Lord punished me, on a whim or whatever, part of me thought of the pain as penance, that it was like payment to the people I killed or hurt. But it wasn't just that..." His voice trailed off as he looked out over the lake. Neither Harry nor Sirius spoke, knowing that they couldn't force this out of him, and too curious to stop him either. Severus resumed his explanation.

"I suppose, one of the reasons was that I felt that this was all I had to give anymore. When Albus asked me to return, I gave up, on life. On my life, that is. I wasn't fighting for my own freedom, for what did I have to live for? There was no one waiting for me at home, worrying for my safety or if I would return at all even. Well, apart from Albus that is. Though I'm beginning to wonder if he ever held any personal regard for me. Or if it was just that he saw me as a useful tool." Here he turned to look at Harry, an intense glint in his eyes. "The way he sees you." Harry was reeling from this new information, and so was Sirius. Harry leant back on the window frame and closed his eyes, trying to take it all in.

Who could ever live that way?

Without hope? Without ever having anyone give a damn about you? It was horrendous! Just like those stories you sometimes read in the local paper, or hear on the local news about someone who died, and no one noticed until a few weeks later, when the neighbours complained about the smell. Sure, people would notice if Snape went missing, he was a teacher and a member of the Order. But what about after the War? What would have happened to him then, if he hadn't married Belle?

“Severus. I don't know how to say this, or if it will mean anything, as it is years too late, but...I'm sorry. I was such a prick to you in school, for no bloody reason. And so was James. I reckon wherever he is now, he knows it too. It was bang out of order, and I apologise.” Sirius said, his head hanging in shame. Severus contemplated him for a few seconds and then huffed a little.

“You know, marriage is turning me into a softie. I'd always imagined that, if you ever did apologise, I would throw it back in your face and spit on you. I know I wasn't much better, I always retaliated. Apology accepted.” He said and offered Sirius his hand. Sirius grinned and shook it, relief flooding his expression.

“It's a curious thing, how every little thing we do can have untold effects on everything else in the world. How, if not thought out properly, and sometimes even if they are, our actions can influence our lives in ways we'd never imagined. Take you two as an example. Sirius you tormented Severus for seven years because he reminded you of everything your family wanted you to be. Severus, you fought back but you carried the hurt it caused for more than twenty years. It has defined a very large part of who you are, for so long, that I wonder...” Harry said his voice fading, as he stared out the window, looking at the stars.

It was funny how people set so much stock in things like astrology. When the stars that we see when we look up, are mostly dead. Muggle scientists had shown, that their light takes so long to reach us that they probably burned out millions of years ago. Harry often wondered what could be achieved if muggles and magic people could work together. Of course, humanity being what it was, such collaborations could, and probably would, open the door for even greater horrors of destruction, than the world had already experienced to this day.

“What do you wonder Harry?” Severus asked in a strained voice, rocked to his very being by the perception and clarity of this boy's, no young man's thinking. He really had been blind to the real Harry, up until now. Harry shifted, shaking himself from his reverie.

“Sorry. I was just thinking. What I was going to say was, I wonder who you’ll turn out to be, once you let go of your hurt, and your hate. I know it’s already begun, seeing Annabelle again was the trigger. I’ve found my self curious a few times, as to what you’d be like if you had someone to care about you. We have more in common than either of us would like to admit, but I’ve had good friends. This thing with the Weasleys aside for a minute, I have had people who gave a damn, and you never did. I don’t understand people who can treat others that way. Particularly people who are supposed to be caring for a child.” Harry yawned and got up.

“Funny old thing, life, isn’t it? I used to walk along the street, looking at other people and feeling rather envious that they all looked so together and that things were going well for them. It wasn’t until I started questioning things, talking to people, I mean really talking to people, that I found out we’re all just as screwed up as each other, on the inside, at least.” Harry stretched a little and chuckled quietly at the matching looks of astonishment on the two older men’s faces.

“Listen guys, I’m going back to bed.” Harry said and turned to go. He paused for a second and then turned back to face his Dad and his Uncle. “You know, I saw a film once, well actually Dudley was watching it and I peeped through a crack in the door. Anyway, it was called ‘The Water Babies’ and was based on a novel by Charles Kingsley. I only managed to see a bit of it, but it stuck with me. There’s two characters in it called Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby and Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid. I remember asking my teacher about it, the next day at primary school. She told me that I should always try and be Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby and not Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid. It’s not an easy thing to do, to treat others the way you would like to be treated, but it’s worth a try, eh?” He said, putting his hands in his pockets and quietly walking back to the stairs.

He ascended rapidly but silently, and the two men still sitting by the window, watched as he disappeared into his room. When he was gone they turned to face each other and then looked away, both turning to stare out of the giant window.

“Well, damn...” Muttered Sirius, after a long silence.

“Indeed.” Replied Severus.

The following morning found the new rooms in a flurry of frenzied activity. It seemed everyone was nervous, fluttering round trying to make sure they had everything, and inevitably shouting back and forth between the bedrooms and the living room, as they couldn't find this, that, or the other and were convinced another family member had hidden it, in some horribly devious way.

“It's not funny Theo! Where is my bloody tie?” Demanded Blaise, leaning over the balcony and snarling at his adoptive brother. The others in the living room snickered a little, making the already annoyed young man even more pissed off.

“Why, you lot...” He began, shaking a fist at them, but was cut off by Belle stopping and tapping him on the shoulder.

“Blaise, sweetie, you're wearing your tie.” She said, with a smile, patting him on the back and then sweeping off down the stairs. Blaise looked down to see he was, in fact, wearing his tie and sighed. He looked back at the people scattered round the living room and scowled.

“Not one bloody word.” He said darkly, and they all worked very hard not to laugh. It lasted all of about ten seconds before the whole room cracked up, a couple of people (Theo and Harry) howling with laughter.

“Ignore them son.” Said Remus kindly, not even cracking a smile. Blaise just ‘humphed’ and followed the werewolf down the stairs and out the door. The rest of the family followed, still chuckling a little, but trying to calm themselves down, if only for Blaise's ego's sake. Everyone recognised that today could be a mite stressful. For all of them.

They trundled down the staircases as a group, heading for the Great Hall. Pansy and Hermione were discussing something about books and the library, and the four boys were predictably dissecting the talent in this years Quidditch season. They were none of them sure if

they would be allowed on their house teams this year, though in Draco and Harry's cases for their teams to abandon them now would be the worst kind of folly. There was no one good enough to replace them, in either house.

The four adults were discussing lessons, Dumbledore's last minute offer didn't give any of them time to formulate correct lesson plans. It wasn't too much of a problem for today, as the second years and up would all be having a review of last year's material, and the first year's first lessons were normally a meet a greet, and a way of seeing which level everyone was at.

Having three Defence Against the Dark Arts professors was a little bit of an overkill, but it meant that they could split the years up, and make sure they all got the best instruction possible. They'd already agreed last night that Remus would take the first through third years; Sirius would take the fourth through sixth years, leaving Severus to concentrate on the seventh years.

They'd divided them this way, because Belle and the others had suggested that despite the DA, the seventh years would need the most rigorous teaching, as the subject had been taught abysmally for the length of their schooling, apart from the year when Remus had taught them. They would need the most preparation and frankly, Severus had the most experience. By only teaching one year group, he would have a great deal of free time where he could research his potions and also give private tuition to anyone who needed it. He would also cover Remus' classes during the full moon.

The group split as they entered the Great Hall and they all wandered off in the directions of their tables. Since most of the Deatheater's children had not returned to the school that year, the four Slytherins didn't have much trouble at their table. Harry and Hermione got a few sharp looks off Ron, but not much more than that. The four professors got a few stares, and Belle even got a glare from Dumbledore, but other than that, no one commented.

When the post arrived, a brightly coloured owl flew down and landed in front Harry, sticking out its leg for him to take the letter attached there. He dutifully took the roll of parchment and thanked the funny

looking bird, offering it some of his breakfast while he unrolled the letter. He chuckled a little as he read it, and then offered it to Hermione. She read it out loud.

Dear Harry,

Alright mate? We're sorry about yesterday at the station. Things have been a bit weird with Mum and everything. We just thought we should let you know, that despite appearances, we're with you mate! Don't really know what's going on with everyone else, especially ickle Ronniekins, but you've always had our backs, and we'll always have yours.

We're setting up a shop in Hogsmeade; we'll be there in a few weeks. Swing by and see us, and bring the lovely Hermione. Oh, and the rest of your crazy family too, if you like. Congrats on finally admitting you like her man, it only took, what? Six years? But seriously, good on ya! She's one in a million.

Take care mate, and make sure, when this year is over, you go out with a bang. (Trust us, the chicks dig a rebel)

See you soon,

Gred and Forge.

Hermione blushed a little when she read the bit about the 'lovely Hermione' and 'she's one in a million' comments. Harry just smiled and took her hand, bringing it across the table so he could bend down and kiss it. Hermione blushed even more, but didn't snatch her hand away. Harry, head still bent, lips still pressed to her soft skin, looked up into her eyes and smiled.

Hermione felt her heart flutter at the look in his eyes, and felt her body temperature rise a little. She almost sighed with relief when he let go of her hand, and went back to his breakfast with renewed vigour. She clutched her hand to her chest and tried to still her pounding heart.

Belatedly realising that most of the rest of the house had stopped to watch the exchange between the new couple, Hermione shook herself and reached for her drink. As she took a sip, her action seemed to release everyone who'd been staring, and the table erupted in talk. Lavender and Parvati were sitting next to her, and started to gush over how wonderfully charming Harry was and how he proved chivalry wasn't dead after all.

Seamus and Dean were sitting on one side of Harry, and Neville was on the other. All three guys looked at him with envious admiration at Harry's silky skills.

"Dude, that was smooth." Dean said with appreciation. Seamus nodded.

"Yeah, check out Harry 'The Ladies Man'. You got the moves." He said. Harry laughed and then put his pumpkin juice down.

"Now, now Seamus. Get it right. I'm not a 'Ladies Man', and I'm not some Casanova wannabe either." He looked over at Hermione and the other Gryffindor girls who were all listening avidly, wondering what he would say. He smiled, eyes full of emotion, not really caring who noticed. "I'm a one woman guy, and something tells me I always will be." He said, not taking his eyes from her. The guys at the table groaned at such a romantic display, while the girls just gushed even more than they already had been.

They were interrupted by Professor McGonagall walking over with their schedules, and after checking his, Harry found they predictably had Potions first thing, with all three of the other houses. After finishing breakfast, Harry trekked down to the dungeons with Hermione, actually looking forward to the lesson, probably for the first time in his entire Hogwarts career. The reason for this was no mystery: he was on good terms with most of the Slytherin seventh year, and his Auntie Belle would be teaching. She'd already told him this lesson would be a review of some of last year's material and so he wasn't too worried.

When they arrived, Harry and Hermione sat together at the front of the classroom, Blaise and Draco behind them, Pansy and Theo on

their right. A few minutes after they sat down, Annabelle entered, the whole class not so subtly looking down to see if her robes billowed. That would have been difficult though as she wasn't wearing the style of robes her husband favoured. She was dressed elegantly and simply, and surprised them all by actually laughing at their fascination with her apparel.

"Good morning everyone. Welcome back for what will be your final year at Hogwarts. I imagine you have questions about myself and my relationship with my husband. I can tell you now, that I will not be answering any of those questions. With respect, that is none of your business and certainly nothing to do with why we are all here today. Understood?" She said fixing them with a stern gaze, not that unlike Severus'. They all mumbled yes and then she smiled warmly at them.

"Now, my husband has been very helpful in giving me a rundown on where you all are with regards to the NEWT's material. You will find my method of teaching does differ from his in some ways. My opinion is this: you are all seventeen and over now, therefore in the eyes of our world, you are adults. As such, I will expect you to behave that way. I am here to help you study the fascinating art of potion making, but the initiative will have to come from you. I will get paid regardless of whether you pass this subject or not. If it comes to your exam and you don't know what you're doing because you didn't pay attention, that will be your fault, not mine. Are we clear?" This time the confirming mumbles were a bit louder.

"Excellent. That said, if anyone doesn't understand anything, needs more time, or would like extra tuition, please say something. Potions are not easy, believe me, I understand. I was in your position once. There is no shame in asking for help, sitting in silence when you don't understand something, will not do anybody any favours." She said firmly, but with a friendly smile.

"Right then, now let's...ah, yes? Miss Snape?" Belle asked, noticing Pansy's hand in the air.

"Sorry for interrupting you Professor Snape. I was just wondering, which house were you in when you attended the school?" Pansy

asked. Belle frowned a little but could tell that she was merely curious and not trying to start trouble.

“No problem Miss Snape. Can’t you guess?” She replied with a slight smirk. The young people in the room looked between themselves trying to figure it out. One of them put their hand up.

“Yes Miss Bones?” Belle motioned for her to speak. Susan put her hand down.

“Was it Slytherin, Professor Snape? After all, Professor Snape was there. I mean, the other Professor Snape.” Susan looked like she’d confused herself a bit. Belle suddenly saw the shared name thing was going to be an issue.

“No, Miss Bones, it wasn’t Slytherin.” She replied and then Terry shouted out.

“Gryffindor then!” He said and Belle tutted at him.

“How rude! And from a member of my own house no less! I won’t take any points this time, but please refrain from shouting in my classroom Mr Boot. Or will be forced to take points, which would be a shame, as I imagine you’ve all worked out by now that I was a Ravenclaw.” She said and Terry blushed, feeling suitably chastised. Belle looked round to see if there would be any more interruptions. Satisfied that they were all ready to get to work, she walked towards the blackboard.

“Right then. Instructions on the board.” She said, flicking her wand at it and then saying what she’d been dying to say all lesson. Doing her best impression of her husband, she said sternly, “Begin!” and then ruined it by chortling behind her hand.

Chapter Twenty – In Which Some Discoveries are Made

“He who has a thousand friends has not a friend to spare, And he who has one enemy will meet him everywhere.”

Ali ibn-Abi-Talib (602 AD - 661 AD), *A Hundred Sayings*

Harry was sat on a thick rug in front of the large fireplace in his family's rooms, staring into the healthy blaze. He could hear the others talking around him, but he wasn't really listening. He'd slipped into the state where your mind shuts down and you're halfway between sleep and awake. He found it very calming, as it was rare that he ever felt safe enough to do that around other people.

The thoughts of his family brought his mind to the thing which threatened all the happiness he'd recently found: Voldemort.

Something had to be done, that much was obvious.

His training since the binding was removed had been stepped up a notch, (or ten), but it wasn't enough. Salazar had reminded him of the Chamber of Secrets when he'd returned to the rooms that night.

It had been nearly a week since they'd come back to the school and he'd urged Harry to make all haste and go and investigate the hidden rooms there. Armed with the knowledge of how to find the concealed areas within the Chamber, Harry had resolved to visit tomorrow, as it was Saturday, and they were unlikely to be disturbed. He shifted out of his reverie as he heard someone sit down next to him. He smiled when he recognised the scent of that person. Turning, he pressed a kiss to the soft lips of his Hermione.

“Hello sweet.” He said after he pulled away. She just smiled back, no longer surprised that Harry knew it was her before he turned around.

“Hey you. Saw you looking very spaced out. Everything OK?” She asked, shifting closer and leaning into him as he put his arm round

her. She nestled her head on his shoulder and he absently pressed a kiss into her hair.

“Mmm-hmmm. Everything’s fine. I was just thinking – Salazar made me promise to go down to the Chamber tomorrow. Said it was important that we go down there sooner rather than later.” He explained and he let his head rest on top of hers, enjoying the soothing contact.

“Oh, I see. Well, then, we’d better do as he asks.” She replied, yawning. Harry yawned as well, not being able to help himself. Yawns were contagious – as soon as one person yawned, so did everyone else. It travelled round the room like a Mexican wave! Or a Mexican Yawn. Sirius plopped down opposite them.

“You two alright? You look pretty knackered.” He said and the two younger people smiled.

“We’re fine. Just a bit worn out from all that training.” Harry explained. They’d been over some hand to hand fighting that evening with Severus and Remus, and were exhausted. After a nudge from Hermione, Harry also explained Salazar’s request. Sirius nodded.

“If he’s that insistent about it, then it must be important. Guys?” He called out to the rest of the family, and they all stopped talking to listen to him. Sirius turned round so he could face them. “Everyone? Salazar told Harry this evening that he must go down to the Chamber of Secrets as soon as possible. He made him promise to go tomorrow.” He announced and there were a few murmurs from the various family members.

“Well, we’ve already got a plan for this right? Belle, Sev, Harry, Hermione and me are to go down, the rest of you will stay and um, bug – I mean, distract the Headmaster. Right?” Draco said, looking round. Harry nodded, as did Sirius.

“Well, that’s agreed then. Though I reckon Remy should go with you. He’s great with old stuff.” Sirius declared. Remus and a few others winced at Sirius calling historical artefacts and books, ‘old stuff’ but Belle chuckled.

"Not one to mince words, are you brother?" She said with a fond smile. Sirius laughed.

"Dad wouldn't know 'politically correct' if it jumped up and planted him a wet one, right in the kisser." Blaise said, before belching loudly.

"You know, for a supposed pureblood gentleman, you're pretty disgusting, Blaise dear." Pansy said, the look on her face a cross between exasperation and amusement.

"One does try one's best, dear Pansy." Blaise replied with a mocking air of urbanity. She just tsked him and went back to the essay she was writing. Theo looked curiously at his adoptive Father.

"Just what do you have in mind for tomorrow Dad?" He asked and was shocked by the evil glint that suddenly appeared in Sirius' eyes. The others were wondering what kind of madcap affair he was planning. Hermione had some idea, as he'd asked her to look up some things in the school rules for him, but she'd promised to keep it a secret. It wouldn't harm or degrade anyone, so she was perfectly happy to help out.

"Wait and see, Theo lad. Wait and see." Sirius replied, and Harry and a few others groaned.

Surely this meant Trouble. With a capital 'T'. Poor old Dumbly-door.

The next day, after a nice filling breakfast, the two groups parted ways and headed off for the tasks they'd set for themselves. Belle, Sev, Remus, Harry, Hermione and Draco slipped off to the girl's bathroom on the third floor, while Sirius, Theo, Blaise and Pansy went to an unused room off one of the corridors on the ground floor.

The three younger people were shocked and confused by the sight that met them when Sirius revealed his plans with a 'Ta-Daaa!' There were stacks of rather large bizarre looking, bulbous, very orange things with a smiley face and two bits sticking up at the top.

"Well?" Sirius prompted, very amused by the blank looks on the faces of the young purebloods.

“Erm, what are they?” Pansy asked and Sirius scoffed.

“Silly Pansy. Why, they’re Space Hoppers of course! With just a little, itty-bitty charm to make them extra bouncy, and crash free!” He declared gleefully.

“You want us to bounce around on those?” Theo asked with a sniff. Sirius nodded enthusiastically.

“How undignified.” Muttered Pansy. Sirius just stuck his tongue out at her and blew a raspberry. Then he picked one of the larger ones, sat on it, holding the sticky up bits in his hands, and proceeded to bounce round the room, and out the door. His departing ‘Woo-Hooooo!’ echoed down the corridor.

“Hell Yeah!” Declared Blaise as he grabbed one and followed his very childish Dad. Theo and Pansy shrugged, and decided they could do with a little bit of fun too. So they grabbed orange things of their own and joined the other two.

“**Open**” Harry hissed at the sinks, and the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets began to reveal itself. He and the others looked down the ominous dark chute.

“You want us to jump, down there?” Snape asked with a distasteful sneer, looking down into the darkness with obvious scepticism.

“As much as I would like to say ‘yeah’ and laugh when you landed in a heap at the bottom...no, you don’t need to jump.” Said Harry with a smirk and a sigh. “**Stairs**” He said, speaking in Parseltongue again. A spiral staircase appeared and wound its way down into the blackness. Harry calmly stepped on and led the way down into the Chamber.

“WEEEEEEEEEE.....”

Minerva jumped at the noise as it passed her office door. She got up and looked out into the hallway to try and find the source of the noise. There was no one in sight. She frowned and then shrugged, turning

back to her desk and her marking. A few seconds later there was another interruption.

“Wooooooooopeeeeeeeeeee.....”

The sound faded off into the distance and she got up again, a little miffed at the distraction. She had a lot of papers to get through. Again she searched for the culprit but they seemed to have disappeared round the corner. It was only a few paces away and she thought about going to investigate, but decided against it, her mind still on her work.

“AAAHHHHH.....”

This time she actually huffed as she threw down her quill, marching to the door, with stern words on her lips. She muttered to herself as she returned to her desk, yet again empty handed.

“Whooooooooaaaaaaahhhh.....”

Her eyes were actually fixed on the open door of her office, so when the whatever it was went past, she actually caught a glimpse of it, albeit a very brief one. All she could see was an orange blur, which seemed to be bouncing past at high speed, and looked like it had a student in its grip. She ran over to the fireplace to Floo the Headmaster, as this looked like big trouble.

The scouting party trudged along in the dreary passageways, as they headed for the entrance to the Chamber.

“I wonder what Sirius and the others are up to.” Harry mused and Remus chuckled. “What Moony? Did he tell you what he had planned?” Harry asked, intrigued by Remus’ smirk.

“Do you know what a Space Hopper is, Harry?” He replied, and the two of them burst out laughing, quickly joined by Annabelle and Hermione, who knew about such muggle things.

“Oh, sweet Jesus! He didn’t?” Belle said, trying to control her laughter. Remus nodded.

“I’m afraid he did Belle. Plus, he added a charm to make them even bouncier than normal. With extra safety measures of course.” Remus added the last part to appease the worried look on Hermione’s face when he mentioned the added bounciness. She looked relieved, and still highly amused.

“Er, what are you guys talking about?” Demanded Draco, with a nod from Severus. Neither of them had a bloody clue what a Space Hopper was, and thought it sounded a bit rude. What with all the overuse of the word ‘bouncy’. Hermione quickly explained and the two wizards looked suitably impressed (Draco) and mildly disapproving (Snape) but on the whole, rather amused.

“Well, as long as they’re having fun. And it will piss the old man off no end.” Said Harry, and then he stopped when he reached the huge skin the creature had shed. Someone had cleared the rockslide, and Harry wondered silently who had done it. The answer pressed itself gently into his mind.

The castle herself did it.... Harry realised. He puzzled at when she had done it, and that question was answered too. She had done it recently, after Salazar had stressed how important it was that they come down here.

Thank you. Harry sent the thought to the castle, and received gracious acceptance in return. He looked up to find the others examining the skin of the massive serpent in shock and awe.

“It must have been enormous...” Hermione said and Harry couldn’t help snickering at the innuendo. Hermione gave him a scolding look and held up his hands.

“Bloke here Hermione. I can’t help it.” He defended himself. She frowned crossly.

“Like that’s an excuse?” She declared and Harry chuckled.

“Don’t underestimate how infantile men are about sex.” Harry said and Hermione huffed and looked at the other men in the group. Remus, Draco and Severus all paused for a moment and then shrugged. Harry went on. “Men are people who have sex – because

– they have a headache.” He explained and the other blokes just nodded. It was true, after all. Hermione looked like she would protest, but then just sighed. Belle pat her on the shoulder sympathetically, and then decided to bring this conversation back to the task at hand.

“Right then, after such an informative discussion...Severus, is this useable at all?” She said and her husband examined it for a few more moments and then shook his head.

“No, it’s too decomposed.” He replied and she nodded.

“OK, let’s move on then. Harry?” Belle raised her eyebrows and Harry hurried forward to lead the way again. They didn’t have to go far before they reached the circular door, which, after a hiss from Harry, slowly opened to reveal the secret hideaway of Salazar Slytherin.

Harry entered with a great deal of trepidation, not having any fond memories of this place. He swallowed through his fear and headed towards the rooms the Founder had told him about. He stopped when they reached the carcass of the basilisk. They spent a few minutes examining it, before Severus distributed containers and protective gear, and directed them as to which parts they should gather and how.

This went on for a while, because as Hermione had predicted, it was enormous! After an hour or so, Snape declared them finished and called Dobby down to transport their treasures back to their rooms. Once that was all taken care of, they again followed Harry through the mouth of the statue of Salazar, and started hunting for the hidden rooms.

“Headmaster, something seems to have got hold of one of the students!” McGonagall told Albus breathlessly, her usual composure lost in the oddity that had bounced by her office door.

“Calm down Minerva. What did you see?” Albus replied, slightly annoyed at the interruption. He listened impatiently as his Deputy described her bizarre encounter with an orange blur, and sighed, realising he would have to stop what he was doing and take care of whatever it was.

“Fine, fine. Minerva, move out of the way so I can come through.” He said, irritated.

This was just not his day.

Neville and Luna were walking happily into the Entrance Hall, having been out on a short walk together. They were chatting idly as they heard a loud squeal.

“HEHHAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaayyy.....!” As something undistinguishable bounced past them. They just gaped, looking in the direction it had gone. Suddenly they heard another noise, sort like a squelching sound.

“Hey! W-W-Wait for meeeeeee.....Whooooooooaaaahhhh.....”

This time the thing slowed down and they saw it was a student. Blaise Black, from Slytherin.

“Ah, Longbottom, Lovegood. Want a go?” He offered, bouncing past, and then trying to turn back around to face them, with some difficulty. Eventually he managed to slow to a stop and smiled, happily regarding them, one eyebrow raised. They looked at each other, and then shrugged.

“Sure thing.” Replied Neville, and Luna nodded.

“Oh, goody! Follow me!” He declared and bounced off again. They both laughed and ran after him, his chuckles and the boing of whatever he was riding letting them know which way he'd gone.

“Ah, here we are.” Harry said, pressing on a piece of a blank stone wall. Sounds of shifting rock could be heard and the wall rose up revealing well lit room on the other side.

“How did you know that was the right spot?” Remus asked curiously, following Harry into the room and looking round, excited at their find.

“Hmmm? Oh, it had a small pattern which Sal told me to look out for.” Harry replied, he too lost in the treasures to be found in the room to be paying much attention.

They were standing in what looked to be like a modest sized library, with a great roaring fireplace on the wall to the right of the door, with a huge desk on one side of it. The rest of the walls were lined floor to ceiling with bookshelves, and it even had an upper tier. Everyone stood in the study-come-library, gazing in awe at the amount of knowledge that was gathered there. Knowledge which potentially, could have been lost to mankind, until now.

“I assume this is what he wanted to us to see.” Severus mused and Harry nodded.

“Has to be really. There must be something here, in one of these books which can help us...Ooof!” Harry stumbled a bit as a couple of fast moving books launched themselves off one of the upper shelves, and hit him in the stomach.

“Thanks Sal!” Harry declared with a grimace. He could have sworn he heard far off snickering. Stupid Founder. He bent down to pick them up, rubbing his abused abdomen. His eyed widened when he read the titles.

“Demon Possession: What to do when the thing that went bump in the night is now in your head.”

“Swords of Legend: Pointy things to help get you out of a tight spot.”

“What have you got there Harry?” Hermione asked, curious about the flying books. He wordlessly handed them over and she quickly scanned the titles. “Oh my.” She said, and then handed them to Snape. The books travelled round the room and Harry went to sit in front of the fireplace.

Why had Salazar caused those two books in particular to fly at him? He pondered it for a moment and then looked down at his watch.

“Guys, we’d better get going, if we stay here much longer, we’ll be missed.” He said and the others stopped their examination of various objects and grudgingly agreed.

They made good time trekking back through the Chamber and up the stairs into the bathroom. Everyone was unusually quiet as they walked back to their rooms. They were unprepared for the sight that met them, when they looked over a balcony and into the Entrance Hall however.

The first thing they noticed was the noise. The place was awash with screeching and happy yells. The Hall was filled with students bouncing round on the Space Hoppers Sirius had brought.

“I thought it was just the four of them?” Said Draco and Harry shrugged. They all laughed as they saw the Headmaster and McGonagall in the midst of the chaos, unsuccessfully trying to stop the students so they could confiscate the Hoppers.

Remus had told the others to go on ahead while he used the bathroom, and had just caught up with them. He wondered why they were all just standing there and staring, so he walked up beside them and peered down into the Hall below. He snorted and then burst out laughing at the chaos. He tried to speak as tears started to gather in his eyes.

“Oh, this is just classic Padfoot. People may wonder why I married him, but at times like this...well...!” He just snorted again and carried on laughing. The others blinked at him for a few minutes and then they snorted with laughter too. Pretty soon they split up, with Draco, Harry, Hermione and Remus running off to see if there were any spare Hoppers, and Belle and Severus deciding to return to their rooms. Harry handed them the books before they left and they walked quietly back down the corridors.

“It would explain a lot.” Belle said suddenly and Severus jumped a little. He turned his head to regard his wife.

“What would? Possession?” He asked, knowing full well who she was talking about. She nodded, and Severus frowned. She tried to explain.

“He...changed....his personality would alter in a split second. From kind Father to evil bastard. Just like that!” She said, clicking her fingers. When they reached the family rooms, they spoke the password, which inwardly made Severus smile, and went and sat on the sofa. Dobby provided tea, and they sat thinking about it for a while, drinking in silence. The former spy shifted as something occurred to him.

“Didn’t he make his first kill when he was fifteen?” He asked and Belle nodded.

“Yes he did. I have a theory though, but I’m not sure about it. It’s rather woolly, and frankly, I don’t know of anyway to corroborate it.” She replied taking a sip of her tea, her eyes seeming far away for a moment. Severus placed a hand on her knee in encouragement.

“Woolly or not my dear, please do share. It’s only with theorising that we can draw any conclusions. Even if the conclusion is to abandon the theory, that is still progress.” He said and she smiled, recognising the edict of their mutual former Potions Master, Keishi Arakida.

“True.” She said and then paused for a moment, as if gathering her thoughts. “My Father used to lecture me, on many subjects. Particularly the search for power and knowledge. He was, or is, a firm believer that knowledge is power.” She said and he nodded, knowing this about his former Lord.

“Well...” She continued. “He told me of a time when he had run from the orphanage, into the fields beyond it, to escape the bullies which plagued him. He stumbled into a copse of trees and sought shelter there, as it had begun to rain. He decided to explore for a bit, thinking that whatever was in the woods could not be as bad as what he had just run from. He told me that it was unlike anything he’d ever seen before. Usually such areas are teeming with life, in amongst the trees, but this was different. Hardly any light penetrated the thick foliage and the trees gave him a sense of foreboding. They were reaching for the light, trying to choke each other out of it and take all the nutrients and

sunlight for themselves.” She shivered remembering the fear this story had evoked in her as a young child. She went on.

“Anyway, he went in further, having decided not to turn back, and felt something slowly begin to seep into his bones, chilling him deep inside. I asked him once, what he thought it was.” She said, looking scared. Severus shuffled closer, wrapping his arm around her in comfort.

“What did he say?” He asked quietly. She shuddered.

“In a word: Evil. Like nothing he’d ever experienced before. He carried on though and eventually, he reached a clearing. It had got even darker by then, and he came upon a stone summerhouse, glowing eerily in the moonlight. Naturally, being too curious for his own good, he went to investigate. There, on the door of the summerhouse, was the idol of the Goddess Astarte.” Belle said in a whisper. Severus felt a chill travel down his spine at the mention of that name. The Goddess Astarte, Ashtoreth, Ishtar, or Venus. Whose rites were sometimes referred to as ‘abomination’. Not by all of course, but certainly hardly ever practiced in this day and age.

“What happened next?” He asked, wary of the answer. Belle shifted a little, clearly uncomfortable.

“Well, here he was a bit sketchy. He went into the Idol House and must have passed out, as he can't remember anything after going in there, and then waking up in a crumpled heap on the floor, the next day. He said that after a few weeks, he began to feel more powerful, more able. His magic had grown stronger, and his weakness, meaning his emotions, had begun to ebb away.” She said and Severus looked into the flames, considering everything he’d heard.

“And how old was he when this all happened?” He asked, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

“Fourteen.” Belle replied bleakly. Severus sighed, rubbing his free hand across his face. Things were beginning to click, the pieces of the puzzle were starting to fit together. No wonder Salazar had said Leonie's murder was a grievous error. Severus turned to his wife, a look of dread in his eyes.

“Belle...I think I know what’s wrong with him.”

Chapter Twenty One - Where Things Become More Serious

“Seek not, my soul, the life of the immortals; but enjoy to the full the resources that are within thy reach.”

Pindar (522 BC - 443 BC), 518-438 B.C.

Belle waited expectantly for her husband's theories on her Father's madness. She realised he would be the best person to speak to, as he, apart from her, had spent more time at Voldemort's side than anyone else. He had looked on Severus as something of a son, and had wanted to formalise it by arranging a marriage between the two of them. He had known of the young Snape long before his daughter's supposed death and had decided early on that they should wed. How interesting it was, that they were now, in fact, married.

No one could say life didn't have its little ironies.

“He's possessed. He must be. The rapid mood changes, the fact that he seemed to be two different men, the evil, the increased power...it fits. Particularly his current insanity.” Severus said darkly, not hiding a grimace.

“How so? You mentioned....Mother's murder?” She supposed and her husband nodded.

“Exactly. The demon, if that is what it is, could not bear the love that Tom felt for Leonie, and for you. It is literally agony to a creature of such evil. It would slowly eat away at its strength and so it would not be able to keep control of Tom all the time. Hence why he seemed to change.” He said urgently. Annabelle was confused.

“But why, in his lucid moments, wouldn't he ask for help?” She said with a frown. Severus shrugged.

“I don't know. You said he passed out in the Idol House; maybe he didn't know that he was possessed, until the murder perhaps. It is

possible, after all. The reason it was such a grievous error, was that by taking away his love, his child – although the demon was able to gain full control of your Father's mind once it was lost in grief – but once the grief had passed, the man began to fight back at whatever was controlling him. The struggle must have thrown him over the edge, into madness. Neither of them have full control of his mind, so it cannot function properly. It makes sense, and I had begun to wonder..." His voice trailed off as he thought about it.

"About what was happening to him? Why he was changing?" Belle asked and Severus sighed.

"Yes. Demons are not mad, they are just evil, and the Dark Lord has always been evil. But he seemed to slip further and further away. He made rash decisions; he did not plan things properly. His obsession with Harry has only gotten worse...and if this is true....then....Gods! It must be awful. How...horrific! To be a prisoner in your own body..." He said with a blank look on his face, his own mind not able to contemplate the horror.

"Do you think we can save him then?" Belle asked hesitantly.

Oh, how he wanted to say yes! Yes, they could save him, and yes she could have her Father back! But since Salazar had directed them to a book on swords, he really didn't think so. They would probably have to kill him. He didn't know what to say. He just looked at her, with sadness in his eyes and watched the small hope, which had been rising there, disappear.

"I see. Well....even if we can't save him, we can at least release him. That's if all this is correct. He might not be possessed..." She said, sniffing a little. She gave up the pretence that she wasn't crying and her head fell forwards into her hands as she began to sob. Severus wrapped his arms around her and drew her head towards his chest, trying to comfort her.

"Annabelle, this is all just supposition, conjecture, you know that. We can't be sure on anything right now." He said, though he strongly suspected that this was all true. Sure, they didn't have many facts to go on, just their own observations and snippets of conversations, told to many different people.

When you gathered it all together though...

"We should read that book." Belle said, wiping her eyes and sniffing again. Severus pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her, and then leaned over to the table to pick up the book on possession.

"Different theories and ideas regarding Demonic Possession have transposed themselves from Muggle culture into Wizarding culture since muggleborns have entered our world, and brought their religion with them.

Every culture has a fear of disembodied evil, malevolent spirits whose sole purpose is to influence mankind for the worse. If someone is described as being 'demonic', they've probably behaved in an unspeakably evil way and thoroughly enjoyed it.

But demons haven't always had such a bad reputation. The word, 'demon', comes from the Greek word, 'daimon', which means, 'supernatural being', or, 'spirit'. In ancient Greece, it was believed that a daimon could influence a person's character for both good and bad. 2,000 years ago Christianity condemned belief in this kind of spirits and began calling them demons. Demons have been viewed as evil spirits as ever since.

The chief demon has a host of different names: Satan; Lucifer; Beelzebub; and the Devil, to name just a few. Beelzebub is referred to in the Bible as Baalzebub, or Baal. In ancient cultures Baal was a fertility and sun god and was worshipped to ensure plentiful crops. Hebrew priests later taught that Baal was a malevolent spirit, responsible for drought and famine and so he became a demon.

The Christian Church believes it can oust these spirits by exorcism, and in some cases this is successful. However, before the influence of Christianity into the Wizarding World, our opinions on such occurrences was varied and not so fixed.

Many myths and legends transcend both worlds, but none more so than the 'Old Ones'. There are many theories on what these beings could be, however, the same theory appears time and time again,

and its validity has strengthened over the years that this has been studied: The Old Ones are the extremely powerful pure-breed demons that once dominated earth before humankind appeared. The Old Ones possess many different shapes and powers, ranging from reptilian to insectoid, but all of them are gigantic. They were worshipped as gods, ruled over vast territories, commanded fearsome armies and constantly made war against each other. In short, under their rule the world was living hell.

At some point, the Old Ones lost their claim over this world; some were killed while others were driven from this dimension. The corpses of the fallen Old Ones, were placed in stone sarcophagi, while their powers were drained and placed on jewels embedded on the surface of the coffins. All of the sarcophagi were placed in a mystical graveyard known as the Deeper Well, a hole in the world which could be accessed in the Cotswolds in England.

Here Severus closed the book tiredly and leaned back in his seat, closing his eyes. His wife had snuggled into his lap, and her soft snores eloquently announced that she was asleep.

The Cotswolds...that stirred something in his memory...something just on the edge. He worried at it but it wouldn't come loose. He sighed in frustration and carefully levitated the book onto the coffee table so as not to wake Belle.

Could Voldemort be under the influence of the spirit of one of these Old Ones?

Just where exactly was the orphanage he grew up in?

The others returned in high spirits to find Severus and Belle ensconced on the big sofa in front of the fire. Belle was snoozing and Severus staring bleakly into the blaze, almost as if he was looking though it, to something far away and disturbing.

Instantly the whole family snapped to attention and spread out over the various seats and the floor, as it seemed a family meeting was in order. It took Snape a few moments to notice them, startling him from

his dark thoughts. Trying not to wake Annabelle, he quickly filled them in on their theories and what he'd read from the book.

After hearing this explanation, they all sat back a bit and thought about it, trying to rationalise it in their own minds.

"It does make some sick sort of sense." Said Blaise, his face twisted in distaste. There were a few murmurs and nods from the others. Remus was frowning, as if trying to remember something.

"The Cotswolds....the Cotswolds...." He muttered, and then snapped his fingers, making everyone jump. Severus glared at him for the sudden noise had woken his wife.

"Oops. Sorry Belle, Severus. But I just remembered something. The Cotswolds. It was the site of a magical disturbance, some years back. A rupture, if you will, in the fabric of magic itself. I wasn't part of the team that went down there, I just heard about it from some of the people I was researching with when I studied for my Masters in Defence. But they told me all about it. It took nearly a hundred witches and wizards combining a spell to seal it off completely." He said, his eyes wide at the sheer amount of power it had taken. The adults regarded each other, understanding what that meant.

Though well read, most of the students had little practical experience, so to them it was just number. They did not realise the significance of the figures Remus had described. Severus listened to all this and tried to focus on the elusive memory. It was still just out of reach. He looked down at his wife who seemed to be suffering from slight shock.

"What is it love?" He asked quietly, though everyone heard him and turned their heads to listen.

"The Cotswolds." She whispered. A feeling of dread started rise in the spy's stomach.

"Yes dear?" He asked, pleased that his voice didn't quaver, despite the fear that was now seeping into his bones.

"That's where the Heart of Hope Orphanage is." She said, swallowing around the lump in her throat.

“Fuck.” Said Severus and he pulled her to him for a hug, both seeking comfort from the other.

“I don’t understand.” Said Pansy, looking back and forth between her adoptive parents and the rest of the group. Sirius and Remus’ faces were blanched, as were Harry and Hermione’s. Draco, Theo and Blaise however, looked just as confused as she herself was. Remus shook himself and tried to explain.

“You know Tom Riddle is Voldemort. Or at least, as we may think now, Tom Riddle shares his body with Voldemort.” He began and the four of them nodded. “Well, he is a halfblood. His Father was a muggle who abandoned his Mother when he found out she was a witch. She died in childbirth and Riddle was sent to an orphanage – The Heart of Hope Orphanage, in The Cotswolds.” Remus finished with a scared look on his face. Everyone sat back, subdued.

Suddenly Sirius jumped up and clapped his hands together loudly.

“OK, people. We are getting way too heavy here. So Voldemort’s a bastard? What’s new. I’m not going to deny this isn’t all terribly tragic, but we have a job to do here. So, now we know the enemy, how do we defeat the enemy?” He declared, hands on hips, staring at them all.

“Here, here!” Declared Salazar from his portrait above the fireplace, saluting Sirius.

“Thanks Sal.” Said Sirius with a nod, crossing his arms and tapping his foot impatiently. He huffed and raised an eyebrow at the others, who were gaping at him with a mixture of shock and exasperation. Harry shook himself and stood up too.

“Dad’s right. If it’s true, it’s awful what happened to Tom, but we can’t change the past. Hopefully we can find a way to release him from it, and finally let him rest. So, first thing we need to do, is find a way to fight!” He said. The other students stood up and cheered, along with Remus. Belle just laughed from her place on her husband’s lap, and Severus levitated the book on swords at Harry.

“Here you are Harry: “*Pointy things to help you out of tight spot.*” Your speciality, right?” He said with a smirk. Harry caught the book and just chuckled.

“Right you are Professor, right you are.” Harry said with a grin.

The next day, everyone was determined to shake themselves from the gloomy thoughts which had overrun them all the previous night. As they made their way into the Great Hall for breakfast they received rather differing looks from the students and the teachers. Dumbledore and McGonagall had not been happy in the slightest.

Dumbledore was annoyed at the disruption and the fact that Sirius hadn't broken any of the school rules. He was particularly frustrated as he'd been trying to find a way through the wards they had set up in their rooms and had not managed to make any progress whatsoever, even before the interruption.

Minerva was angry because, despite the added safety measures, she still believed Sirius had put the children's safety at risk. She was also irritated that it had taken quite a while to disable the charm that kept replacing the Hoppers after she banished them. Most of the other teachers were just mildly amused, some of them having taught the Marauders in their school days and so fully aware of what he was capable of.

The students however, let up as great cheer as the family wended its way to their respective tables. They had all mightily enjoyed themselves the day before, and were very impressed by their Defence Against the Dark Arts teach. Sirius had been officially declared as cool. And by association, so were Severus and Remus.

Remus and Belle thought the whole thing was hilarious, while their husbands weren't sure they liked the idea at all. Severus was looking forward to lessons on Monday where he would be able to reaffirm his reputation as 'the greasy git'. He did not like the students thinking he was cool.

Not one bit.

Chapter Twenty Two – In Which Things Get a Little Complicated

“One day President Roosevelt told me that he was asking publicly for suggestions about what the war should be called. I said at once 'The Unnecessary War'.”

Sir Winston Churchill (1874 - 1965), *Second World War* (1948)

Belle sat on the tiled floor of the bathroom she shared with her husband, slumped against the side of the toilet she'd just been throwing up in, and wondered how she had gotten to where she was.

Part of her longed for the simple life she had led, before that fateful day when she'd found Sirius. Not that she wasn't pleased to have finally married the only person she'd ever loved, or was likely to, but things had just become a lot more complicated.

She tried to lift her head and felt the nausea begin to rise again, so quickly rested it back on the lid of the loo, breathing deeply. There was nothing left in her stomach to retch and it was making her head hurt.

It had been nearly four months since they'd returned to Hogwarts and things had passed relatively smoothly. Since their discoveries regarding the possible cause of her Father's insanity, they researched long and hard through the books they'd found in the library in the Chamber, trying to find out as much as they possibly could. A group decision had been made to move most of the books up from their hiding place and into their own rooms, after it had been reasoned that they would not stay inconspicuous for long, if they kept to-ing and fro-ing from the girl's bathroom..

Some research had also been done into the question of where Harry's extraordinary powers had come from. A few had wondered if they had been transferred by Voldemort when he gave Harry the scar. Harry had been worried that, if such was the case, he may share the taint of the Old One. But they'd reasoned that his powers were mostly

hereditary, James and Lily being who they were, and probably the rest connected to the Prophecy.

"Fate has a way of balancing these things out. You are who you are, because of the task which has been set for you." Explained Remus. Harry had been a bit sullen at this, asking again why he couldn't just be normal.

"I can appreciate your point of view, but would you really want to be normal? One of the crowd? No one remarkable? And instead of asking 'Why me?' all the time, stop and think about this: is there anyone else you would trust with these tasks? Hmmm?" Asked Snape, and Harry had paused for a few moments, considering it.

"Git." He accused, taking out his frustration on an unsuspecting and rather undeserving cushion, by kicking it across the room.

"Brat." Severus had shot back, and then chuckled quietly along with the raucous laughter which had broken out in the room.

On one of the many evenings they spent in their little private library, they had all been happily loafing about the comfortable room, when a sudden shout disturbed them from their reading and quiet discussions.

"Yes! This is it!" Declared Theo. "It has to be!" He affirmed and leapt up to show Harry the passage he'd been reading. Harry briefly scanned it and then grimaced a little before reading it aloud:

"Cadalborg: Probably the most obscure of the Swords of Legend, little is known about this powerful weapon. In fact it has slipped so far into myth that some believe it never truly existed. Evidence which points to this, is that its legend has been used by muggles in some of their fictional stories and games.

It is written that Cadalborg is the weapon forged by an ancient Sun God, and powered by the Sun Crest and Sun Sigil. Using this Celestial Weapon, one may kill and forever banish creatures of the Abyss.

Some believe that this means if any weapon could ever destroy a demon, Cadalbolg is it. Unfortunately, no one knows whether the weapon is actually real, or where it is. No previous owners have been found, and it is not reported to be the treasure of any prominent family, as is usually the case with items of this kind.

It is feared that Cadalbolg is probably lost.

“Hmm, it goes on to describe the appearance of the sword: a broadsword, with a gold and royal blue handle, a blue crystalline blade of unknown material, with gold writings up and down the blade in an unknown language.” Here Harry passed the book back to Theo with a sigh.

“It’s not much to go on.” Blaise voiced what everyone was thinking.

The last few months had been spent trying to find any other references to the sword, in both the Hogwarts and in Salazar’s library. They had not been very fortunate.

The Christmas Holidays were now fast approaching and they’d had a few discussions on where they would be spending it. The unanimous group consensus was that they would go home, but they weren’t sure if the Headmaster would allow them to. Snape had pointed out with a sneer, that that shouldn’t stop them. While they all agreed with him, they didn’t want to provoke the old man into rash actions.

Oh, he would get his, just not yet.

For now, he was useful as a figurehead for the Leadership of the Light. Lately, they’d all been embracing their Slytherin sides, and they could see the advantages of co-operation with Albus, at least, on the surface anyway.

After four months of her teaching with no nefarious incidents, it seemed he was softening slightly towards Annabelle. No one was sure if this was genuine or not, however, so they treated it with a pinch, or a truckload, of salt.

After the chaos of the Space Hoppers, they'd got a right earful from McGonagall, however the stern witch had not been able to hold her temper for long, when she remembered how happy and carefree the students had looked. She'd approached them a week or so after telling them off, and surprised them all with her praise.

"While I still can't condone the risk to the students' safety, I would like to say thank you for bring some cheer to the halls of this school, Merlin knows we needed it." She said with a smile.

Sirius had spent nearly an hour gaping in shock. Every time his husband closed his mouth for him, his jaw would just drop open again. Later he complained to Minerva that she shouldn't mess with his little bubble world, as he liked it just the way it was, thanks. She'd just chuckled making him even more surprised.

He'd walked away whining.

Belle raised her head again experimentally, and found it was not spinning so much anymore, though it was still pounding. She leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes, wallowing miserably in the discomfort.

She had her suspicions of what was ailing her, and really wasn't sure how she felt about it. If her suspicions were true...well then. What the bloody hell was she going to do? Now was not the time to bring a new person into the world. Not only were they in the middle of a bloody War, she wasn't even sure she wanted kids!

Growing up, she'd always thought, one day she'd have children. It just seemed natural. Logical even. But as she got older, she began to have doubts. Having kids, was something other people did. She had her own life to lead, and the idea of giving it up for someone else, really didn't appeal to her. 'Cause that's what happens when you have a child, isn't it? Your life is never truly your own again, until they're eighteen, or, if ever.

At least, that's what it looked like, from the outside in.

On the other hand, she also had this strong feeling, rise up inside her, making a goofy grin spread itself over her face.

"A baby..."

It was incomprehensible. It was just, it, a word. But it represented this well of emotions: wonder, joy, fear, yearning, excitement, hysteria, terror....

The list just went on, and on, and on.....

She really had no clue what she was going to do about it. She wasn't even sure when she would tell Severus.

That thought shook her out of her introspection and she gingerly rose to her feet. She brushed her teeth to take away the taste in her mouth and shuffled back to their bedroom. A quick glance at the clock she'd brought with her told her it was half five in the morning. She yawned and slid carefully back into the bed next to her slumbering husband.

Her last thought as she drifted off to sleep was: *"Severus' baby."*

It was a couple of weeks later, and various family members were scattered throughout the castle. Tomorrow was the start of the Christmas Holidays and everyone had stuff to do. Belle was busily setting holiday homework for her classes, while the three Defence teachers were also setting theirs, thought some setting more (Severus) than others (Sirius and Remus).

The four Slytherins were eagerly discussing the Yuletide traditions they'd not been able to take part in before, and trying to work out which ones they would like to celebrate with their new family this year. They were also comparing notes on what they'd got for the others, as it was the first time they'd been able to buy the Christmas presents they wanted to. This included more practical gifts which were shunned by the stuffier pureblood families, but which were usually very well received by the intended recipients.

After all there's only so much pretty tat a person can fit into their homes.

Harry and Hermione had decided to get in a bit of extra training, and then later on in the evening, they stole away for some important one on one time. Having arranged things in advance, with lots of helpful advice from his Auntie Belle, Harry made Hermione close her eyes before they went in. After a quick look around to make sure everything was perfect, he told her to open her eyes. She gasped when she saw what had been set up there.

As per Harry's wishes, the room had transformed itself into a beach at night time. There were torches scattered here and there in the sand, making the area glow with a warm orange light. Harry took her hand and led her forwards, towards a simple, white canvas gazebo, under which was a table set for two. In a semi circle round the gazebo were rocks stuck into the ground, they too giving off a gentle light. On the table itself dinner was already set up, candlelight completing the scene.

They stopped at the table and Harry turned to face his girlfriend, apprehensive about her reaction. This was the first time he'd done anything like this, and he was worried about whether he'd got it right or not. He knew his Hermione was a romantic at heart, but then he also knew she didn't like extravagance. He hoped the simplicity of this setting would appeal to her.

"Well...?" He prompted when she had been silent for a few minutes. She seemed to shake out of her stupor.

"Oh Harry!" She declared and threw herself at him. "I love it!" She added, before pulling him in for a long, sweet and loving kiss. Harry mentally cheered, inordinately pleased that she liked it, and glad he'd listened to his Aunt's advice, not his Dad's. That could have been disastrous! Pausing and pulling away slightly to gaze adoringly into Hermione's eyes, Harry smiled gently at her, before leaning back in and abandoning himself wholeheartedly to the kiss, all of his thoughts forgotten for the moment. Apart from one:

"I think this might be love."

In the end, a compromise was worked out for the question of the Christmas Holidays. The family would return home for the first half

and return to the castle on the twenty ninth of December, and spend the rest of the holidays there.

It wasn't ideal, but by going along with it, it kept the old man sweet. No one was very sure if he was aware, of just how much they distrusted him. Despite everything however, he wasn't stupid. He had, of course, known he was in their bad books during the summer, but since then, they'd kept up the semblance of a wish for a reconciliation. As to whether Albus had fallen for this or not, only time would tell. They all knew he couldn't be trusted, so they carried on with their own plans, ever wary of his possible interference and machinations.

By the time they were due to board the Hogwarts Express, everyone in the family was eager to be away from the school and its intrigues. Sure, they knew what they had let themselves in for when they went back in the first place, but it was tiring to keep up such a façade.

They happily arranged themselves in an enlarged compartment, their voices chirpy and animated, as their excitement about going home was brought to the fore. Even the usually stolid Slytherins were bright eyed and slightly boisterous, as the train sped away from Hogsmeade and towards London.

Annabelle sat in one corner, resting her head against the window, watching the beauty of the Scottish countryside fly by. She found it immeasurably calming. Just that morning, Poppy had confirmed what she already knew.

She was pregnant.

Only six weeks, but apparently that more than enough time for the sickness to kick in. She wasn't sure what she was going to do. Severus would have to be told, as would everyone else. For one thing, she could not continue to teach Potions. At least, not all the time. Some of the concoctions her classes brewed up could be toxic and harmful to the baby. And that was just if they got it right.

When she'd first considered that this was a possibility, she'd been very worried and didn't want to think about having a child. But now, the idea had begun to grow on her. She even found herself sitting idly

at her desk while her seventh years worked, thinking about baby names. She was scared though, scared of the world she would bring her child into.

After all, who knew, when and if this War would ever end? And if it did, who was to say their side would win? It was a chilling thought. She resolved not to think about it for now though, as Poppy (who had been sworn to secrecy) had advised her that worry was bad for the baby.

She closed her eyes, drifting off into sleep, full of anticipation of their holiday and picturing people's reaction to her news.

She absently wondered if she could lay odds on the chance of Severus fainting. Or if not Severus, then Sirius. And with that, fell fully asleep, the smile still on her face.

Chapter Twenty Three – In Which the Men Prove to be a Tad Squeamish.

"Ford, there are an infinite number of monkeys outside, who want to talk to us about this script for Hamlet they have worked out."

Arthur Dent, *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*

Miss Pansy Aurelia Snape, formerly Parkinson, was having trouble sleeping. She tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable. Her mind was in overdrive, and wouldn't calm down. Normally she could drift off with no problems, but tonight it felt as if her brain was on fire.

There was something...

She sat up in disgust, and looked at the clock. It was past three in the morning. She sighed, and intended on getting up, but before she could swing her legs round, she blacked out.

It was dark, but she was moving towards a blurry light. It came closer and became clearer and she suddenly found herself in a room, surrounded by people. Bodies littered the area and there was a circle of people around a dark robed figure, lying on the floor. She gasped as she saw a great blue and gold sword sticking out of the figure's chest.

A man and a woman were kneeling next to him, and she could see the wounded figure was a man. The kneeling man looked stricken and the woman was sobbing. The man on the floor however, seemed peaceful and a look of wonder was spread across his face. His hand was pressed to the very pregnant belly of the woman who was crying.

"A grandchild..." The wounded man whispered, and then everything went black again.

Pansy sat bolt upright, sucking in a deep breath. Her heart was pounding and she struggled to slow her breathing and calm herself. What had she just seen? Had she just had a vision? Seers ran in her birth mother's side of the family, but it was thought that she hadn't developed the gift. It was one of the reasons her biological parents had treated her so badly, they'd accused her of being a worthless disgrace, unable to serve her family correctly. She snorted with derision when she thought of them.

It seemed she wasn't as powerless as they'd thought. Now, not only had she escaped being Marked and becoming some Deatheater's whore, which is all they had told her she was good for, but she could use her gift to aid her new family. Her true family – the one she chose for herself.

She debated waking the others to tell them of what she'd seen, but decided it could wait until morning. She stretched, and yawned a little, and then got comfortable in her warm bed once more.

This time she drifted off easily into a contented sleep.

The next morning, while she was getting ready to go down to breakfast, Pansy stopped to think about what she had seen. She didn't recognise the dying man, but given the people lying motionless around him, he had to be Voldemort...and the sword...that was the one Theo had found in that book...the couple...that was Severus and Belle....and Belle! She was pregnant! Close to six months by the look of her...

Hang on...why would she be in a battle when she was pregnant? Was she pregnant now? If she was, did she know?

Pansy was in two minds as to whether to tell everyone this, or whether she should speak to her mother first. But then, they'd always said, no secrets. If something occurred which would affect the family, then the whole family should know. Still...a baby, that was very personal. However, if she was pregnant now, it established a definite timetable for finding the sword and killing Voldemort. And they would find the sword, her vision proved it. She worried at it for a few moments, and then resolved to speak to everyone at once.

Discretion, while admirable, was not going to help in this situation.

During breakfast, Pansy waited impatiently for the opportune moment to speak. While waiting for the inevitable lull in conversation, she went over it all in her mind again. Round and round she went, until she almost drove herself nutters. She threw down her cutlery in a very unladylike way, and huffed. There was silence as the rest of the family regarded her in mild shock.

“Something the matter dear?” Belle asked a tad warily, Pansy looked rather pissed off. The young Slytherin girl knew she was being unduly narky so took a deep breath to calm herself. She then went on to describe what she’d seen: the sword which matched the description of Cadalbolg, what appeared to be the Dark Lord’s demise...

When she was finished, they still all looked pretty astounded. She was tempted to pull faces at them but refrained, it would hardly be the actions of a proper lady. After a pregnant, no pun intended, pause, she stopped trying to kid herself and blew a raspberry at them. That certainly got them talking!

“Wha, well. So that means, we’ll find the sword then, and that we might win too.” Said Theo and everyone started talking at once. Severus cleared his throat.

“Pansy, did you have any indication of the possible time when this is supposed to occur?” He asked, frowning a little. He thought it was a bit too early for celebrations just then. Pansy bit her lip in indecision.

“Um...well...” She hedged and the others turned to look at her, wondering why she was hesitating.

“What is it Pansy, love? You know you can tell us, whatever it is, it’s best to share it.” Annabelle said, getting worried looks from the rest of the family.

“I...you were pregnant Mother, and you looked to be about six months along.” Pansy said, not able to meet her adoptive Mum’s eyes.

“Huh.” Belle said and sat back in her seat, absently running her hands over her still flat stomach. She didn’t realise that everyone’s eyes were on her, and watching her avidly.

“You...you aren’t...now....” Severus gulped and took a long sip of his juice, wishing it was something stronger. Belle seemed to shake herself of whatever fairy land she was in and turned back to her husband.

“Hmmm? Sorry, I was miles away. What did you say?” She asked, a bit concerned at seeing Sirius doing a very good impression of a fish out of water, from the corner of her eye.

“I said, um...you aren’t...I mean....oh Merlin!” Severus said, running a hand through his hair. The students at the table were finding this whole thing rather amusing. It wasn’t every day one got to see Severus Snape so obviously flustered. “Belle, are you pregnant?” He finally managed to ask. Annabelle smiled serenely.

“Why yes, husband. I am. I found out yesterday dear.” She replied, and then watched as the former Potions Master and Spy for the Light’s eyes rolled back into his head and he slid off his chair. There was a thump as his unconscious body hit the carpet, followed a few seconds later by a second one. Belle looked across the table to see Sirius’ chair noticeably empty and tsked.

“You menfolk. No stamina at all. And such weak constitutions.” She accused, happily leaving the two of them where they were, in favour of finishing her breakfast. She tucked in with alacrity, after all, she was eating for two now.

After a couple of *Enervate*’s both Sirius and Severus recovered from their fainting spells, and had to put up with being teased about it for the foreseeable future. Both of them tried very hard to deny that they had done anything so girly as fainting, but there were numerous witnesses to prove that they had. So, they had to deal with the aspersions on their manliness, or lack thereof.

Life didn’t stop because of one vision and the following announcement however, and as Christmas was nearly upon them,

preparations would have to be made. Dobby had gotten a good start on lots of Yuletide goodies. The house was also decorated and was awash with colour. There was mistletoe, and holly wreaths, a huge tree with twinkling lights, and they'd got their first Yule log to celebrate their first Yule Sabat as a family. Everyone was excited and even Snape managed to get caught up in the festivities.

Later that evening, after finally managing to get a moment alone with his wife, Severus brought up what he'd been thinking about all that day. They were lying in bed, both staring at the canopy, both lost in their thoughts. Severus rolled over and regarded Annabelle, whose hands were resting on her stomach. He let his eyes roam over her body for a few moments and then pressed a hand to her belly.

"So, there's a baby in there. A life we made, together?" He said with wonder and awe in his voice. Belle sniffed and he was surprised to see she was crying. He pulled her into a hug. "Whatever is the matter my love?" He asked, not understanding why she was upset. His heart suddenly clenched.

What if she didn't want the baby? His baby? After all, he used to be one of them...a Deatheater...

He started to panic at the thought and ruthlessly pressed it down. It would do him no good to jump to conclusions. That would only lead him into trouble. It was entirely too Gryffindorish.

"I...I thought you wouldn't want it...wouldn't want us..." She whispered into his hair and he tightened his arms for a moment. He loosened them quickly, not wanting to hurt the baby.

"Oh, my dear! Nothing could be further from the truth. OK, I'll admit it was a shock..." Here he scowled as Belle snorted, but he carried on regardless. "Yes, I was surprised, but it was a good surprise. I want this, I want you, more than anything." He assured and pulled away from her, so he could look into her eyes. He felt her relief and joy pour through the bond in waves and just held her again. They fell asleep that way, safe in each other's arms.

Christmas Day eventually arrived and everyone was downstairs pretty sharpish, having been woken by Harry running through the house and yanking open people's doors to yell, "Get up lazy bones, it's Christmas!" Before laughing manically and moving on to the next person. When they were all up, or at least, making noises that indicated that they would be getting up, in the not too distant future, Harry bounded down the stairs to go wish Dobby a very Merry Christmas.

The house elf and the young man bounced round the kitchen excitedly, laughing and shouting, while the rest of the family looked on with sleepy, yet indulgent smiles. Apart from the time spent at Hogwarts, this was the first proper Christmas Harry had ever had. Some of the other children's Yuletide celebrations had been a bit formal and strained, but at least they'd had them.

After breakfast, Harry dashed off into the living room, impatiently waiting for everyone to come in so they could open the presents. Before very much longer, the room was littered with discarded bits of wrapping paper as everyone tore eagerly into their gifts. Even the adults abandoned decorum in favour of the more enthusiastic approach the children used.

All of the Quidditch inclined family members received the latest broom, along with servicing kits. Harry and Draco were both given special seeker training equipment. Everybody got smart new cloaks which had warming charms and a few protection spells on them. Severus got the usual potions supplies and there seemed to be a lot of pranks in circulation. Harry and Hermione were a little sad that they didn't have Weasley jumpers, but at least the twins hadn't forgotten about them.

Later on in the day, they had separated into little groups to try out their new toys and talk quietly about inconsequential things. Belle and Hermione had taken it upon themselves to make sure all the purebloods got something muggle, and for the boys this meant remote control cars and motorbikes. They had to build some of them themselves and despite being rather flummoxed by the whole thing, they seemed to be enjoying the challenge. Once their various

vehicles were completed they had great fun whizzing them round the house, having impromptu races with each other.

Harry sat with Sirius and Remus by the fire while Hermione was with Pansy and Belle, talking about babies and birthing options. Severus was with them and his face was blanched. He was paler than usual and the three men were worried that he might pass out again.

"Looks like Snapey's in need of some rescuing. Wanna help?" Sirius offered and the other two shook their heads.

"What, you want us to willingly go over there? Where they're talking about fluids and...stuff...?" Harry protested, with a look of 'ewwww...'. Remus and Sirius laughed agreeing with their son. Dobby appeared with glasses of mulled wine and handed them out to everyone. Sirius stood up for a minute and called everyone's attention.

"No, I'm not going to make a speech..." He began, pretending not to hear Severus' mumbled, 'Thank Merlin'.

"Merry Christmas everyone. To us!" Sirius declared, raising his glass. The others followed suit and joined in.

"To us!"

Chapter Twenty Four - Where Snake-Eyes Strikes Back

“For somehow this is tyranny's disease, to trust no friends.”

Aeschylus (525 BC - 456 BC), *Prometheus Bound*

It was a good couple of months into the Spring Term, and they were still searching for clues on the whereabouts of Cadalbolg. Pansy had had no more visions, so they were still following a somewhat thin, paper trail. Salazar had heard of the sword, and remembered a similar search from his own time, but didn't know much more than that. All they could do was keep on looking, and hope that something turned up, or Pansy had another premonition.

Harry was currently in a Defence lesson, and wasn't really listening to Snape's lecture. Today they were going over the Patronus Charm, yet again, and he already had that one down pat. A few of the other students could do it too, but Harry's was the only one to pass muster, according to Severus. The Professor seemed to want to prepare them for more than their NEWTS, which Harry greatly appreciated. As such, he wanted to be sure everyone could conjure a Patronus, or something close to it, should the need arise.

No one here was a fool, and most of them realised that the need was very real, so for once, everyone was paying rapt attention. The also began to wonder why Dumbledore had not given Snape the Defence job before now, as it was clear he was more than qualified for it. Harry silently wondered how different things may have been, if they'd had a teacher of his caliber prepare them from day one. Having said that, he still wasn't paying attention just then. Instead, he was busy ruminating over the past few months, wondering at the odd turn in his life.

Not that he was complaining, mind you. Quite the contrary. He and Hermione had grown extremely close, but had not slept together yet. They neither of them wanted to rush things, and since it would be the first time for both of them, they didn't want it to happen with the War

hanging over their heads. Though lately, it had been harder and harder for either of them to resist the temptation. There was always that niggling thought in the back of their minds, that one or both of them might not make it, and so they should take what happiness they could, while they had the chance.

And it wasn't like they didn't have any good examples to follow. There was Severus and Annabelle, all set to have a baby. Belle wasn't showing yet, she probably wouldn't until about twenty four weeks, which was a little way off yet. She was positively glowing these days, finding her husband's quiet fussing rather amusing. Severus alternated between taking it all in his stride and then becoming agitated when he thought she was overdoing things.

They'd worked out a schedule for Potions lessons as there were some potions it was too dangerous for her to be around. There weren't too many though, so Snape was perfectly able to cover those for his wife, without taking on too much work for himself. His return to the Potions classroom had been met with mixed feelings. His family were always pleased to see him, most of the Ravenclaws were indifferent, Hufflepuffs wary, Slytherins unknown and the Gryffindors, downright suspicious.

He treated them all exactly the same however, and was pleased to see that none of them had fallen behind. He had thought that, as his wife was undeniably much easier going than him, some may have taken advantage. But he was pleased that that was not the case. Harry smiled thinking of the looks on everyone's faces when he'd swooped into the dungeon classroom for the first time in months.

Then, there was also Remus and Sirius, another example of a couple making the most of things. He almost laughed out loud when he remembered the looks on the faces of his adoptive parents, when he and his brothers, over the Christmas Holidays, had innocently asked when they could expect a new brother or sister. They both sat gaping for a good few minutes until Severus cut in with, "Gryffindors! You two are doing a wonderful impression of an intellectual vacuum." When they both turned to him, still gaping, he leaned forward and closed their mouths for them.

Remus had recovered first, and blushed, remembering the discussion he'd had with his husband the night before. Belle's announcement had made Remus broody, and he'd cautiously brought up the idea, only to find Sirius more than willing. In short order, he'd found himself pinned to the bed, while his mate suggested they get some practice in before asking Belle or Severus for a potion.

"Ah, that's a good question boys. We were going to ask Belle or Severus if one of them could brew a potion for us." Remus said, looking appealingly at Annabelle. Severus huffed.

"I will have to brew it for you, as it would be dangerous for my child to be exposed to the fumes." He declared, crossing his arms. Remus and Sirius exchanged worried glances and sank a little lower in their seats. Remus particularly looked, a little dejected.

"What?" Demanded Severus, a trifle offended. The werewolf jumped, and then looked down a mite sheepishly.

"Well, it's just, I'm the one who'll have to drink it, and well..." He hedged. The Potions Master rolled his eyes at him and scowled.

"Stop being an idiot, Black. Say what you mean." He said, tapping a foot impatiently. Belle had anticipated what Remus was going to say and went to stand behind her husband's chair. She placed her hands on his shoulders and waited. Remus looked round the table for support, but found the rest of the family either tucking into their breakfast, and watching avidly.

"It's just...your potions always taste so foul!" He wailed, hiding behind his hands. Annabelle felt Severus stiffen under her hands and waited for him to start shouting. The room was deathly silent for a few long moments and then Snape snorted. He tried to cover it, but in the end he couldn't hold it in, he burst out laughing, big hearty laughs. The rest of them paused, surprised and then joined in.

Harry was jolted out of his remembrances by Snape's voice, asking him to come up to the front and demonstrate his Patronus. Once that was done, and Prongs had done a circuit round the room, Harry

returned to his seat and promptly stopped paying attention again. If Snape noticed, he didn't seem to care.

In the end it had been Severus who made the potion for the two men, but he'd compromised by using Belle's recipe. He'd muttered and complained about it, but couldn't help getting caught up in the enthusiasm of the rest of the family for the potential new arrival.

Whatever the former spy had put in it, seemed to work though, as Remus was now expecting a baby, and he too was glowing. Belle was about fifteen weeks along and Remus was about nine weeks.

The family had debated making a general announcement of the pregnancies, and in the end, decided only to tell those who needed to know. Which meant the staff, as they would need to rearrange lessons; unfortunately this also included the Headmaster.

Not surprisingly, Belle was extremely worried about what Albus might do. She had nightmares of him trying to hurt the baby or her. It didn't help that sometimes the old man was harder to read than a Thomas Hardy novel, and when they told him, no one could get a firm grip on what he planned. It was then that they decided to try and take Minerva into their confidence. Harry was not the only surprised by that particular interview.

"Oh, thank the Founders! I thought I was the only one having doubts!" She'd confessed to them when they'd invited her to their rooms for dinner over the weekend, to discuss the situation. Dumbledore was in London, consulting with Cornelius Fudge, so she was able to miss dinner in the Great Hall. Apparently she'd grown increasingly afraid of what had been happening under his orders. It was during this discussion that Hermione had shocked them all.

"Um, guys, I have a theory, though it is a little far-fetched, and I don't have much to go on..." She began and bit her lip, nervously.

"Go on Hermione, any ideas are welcome here." Remus said kindly.

"Well...I've not read enough to know if this is something wizards can get too. I know our magic protects us from things like cancer. But it

almost sounds to me like he's suffering from schizophrenia. Paranoid schizophrenia." She explained, and there were a few sceptical noises. "I know it sounds far-fetched but please hear me out?" She paused, waiting for their answering nods. "Well, my, um, cousin, has it and he suffered from rapid mood changes, disordered thinking, hallucinations, extreme paranoia, delusions of persecution, delusions of grandeur...is any of this ringing a bell?" She said, with a pained look on her face. The others sat there shocked; it did kind of make a morbid sense.

"And what of your cousin, Hermione? What type of life does he or she lead now?" Severus asked, still rather shell shocked at her insight, accurate though it could turn out to be.

"Oh, he's fine now. He was in hospital, the psychiatric ward for nearly two years, I think. He's a muggle by the way. He then went into rehab and then a halfway house. He was on a drug called Chlozoril, which worked wonders but had terrible side effects. Now he's on something else, begins with a 'Q', I don't remember the name of it. Anyway, the long and short of it is, he went back to university and got his degree and Masters in Computer Science and now he has a steady job, nice place...all that. In fact now that he takes his medication every day, he's made a full recovery and is probably the most normal, stable and grounded person I know. Heh." She said, her eyebrows raised at the irony of the situation.

"How can he be normal if he's nuts?" Sirius asked and received a good few glares and a smack on the head for his less than sensitive comment.

"Well, for one thing, he is not nuts! But, I see where you're coming from. Thing is, is that his medication blocks off the psychotic part of his brain. Which coincidentally, is the part that helps you learn things. He had to start from scratch with everything, even relearning how to tie his shoelaces. The rest of us have that part of our brains still active. We still have those potential psychotic tendencies. Though in most people they never get set off or anything." She explained and they all nodded again, trying to take it in. Draco leaned forwards a little, refilling people's glasses.

“Seriously though Granger, when do you find the time to learn all this stuff?” He asked, but with a smile on his face to show it wasn’t meant as an insult.

“It’s a bit close to home for me, and when I found out, I wanted to learn everything I could about the disease or condition, or whatever you want to call it. I mean, who knew? It could be genetic and I might get it someday.” She replied and noticed some of the people round the table shifting uncomfortably in their seats. She laughed a little.

“Look, it’s not and I’m not, OK? No one knows the definitive cause of the illness. For my cousin, they believe it was the fact that his mother was in labour with him for three and half days. That coupled with a difficult childhood, and the fact that he took a lot of hard drugs, acid and the like, while he was at university the first time round, could have been what caused him to develop the disease. Nobody knows for sure though.” Hermione took a big gulp of her drink. It was still hard to talk about what had happened. She remembered talking to him before he’d been sectioned and not really knowing what to say to him. She could also remember the maniacal glint in his eyes.

“And what makes you think Albus could be schizophrenic then Hermione?” Belle asked and the young woman frowned.

“You do Belle. At the height of his illness, Michael, that’s my cousin, believed that his mother was at the head of a conspiracy to destroy his mind. He also believed that he couldn’t trust any of us because she’d got control of us and passed her taint onto us. If you think back over Dumbledore’s behaviour – it fits.” She said and Belle slowly nodded.

“You’re right, it does. He didn’t want me anywhere near Harry in case I ‘corrupted’ him. He didn’t want Harry living with Sirius or Remus when his parents died as he would be out of the Headmaster’s sphere of control. After Harry defeated Voldemort as a baby, he took his time about clearing Severus of Deatheater charges, so that he would be desperate enough to take the job teaching, where Dumbledore could keep an eye on him. The disease has been dormant, up until now. His seeing me again had tipped him over the edge. I wouldn’t be surprised if I rate as a higher evil in the old man’s

eyes than my Father does.” Belle said and they could all see the connection. It was a chilling thought.

Harry shuddered just thinking about it. It was a very scary thought, to be trapped in your own delusions that way. They’d concluded that it was a good theory as to what was wrong with the old man, but a theory was all it was. Same as with Voldemort. But McGonagall had offered some reassurance with regards to the babies. She thought that he would not want to kill them, but would try and take control of them when they were born. Both would be powerful, if their parents were anything to go by, and she surmised that he would try and come up with some scheme which would allow him to place them with families of his choosing.

She too was no less susceptible to the gushiness that overtakes people when it comes to babies, and she had exclaimed with delight over the dual pregnancies of Remus and Annabelle, not missing the chance to lightly tease Severus, her long time colleague and friend about all his fussing over his wife. He had born it well though, but was very grateful for the support of the Deputy Headmistress. He had found it hard, up until then, to be almost on opposing sides to her.

The lesson was nearly over, when Harry winced at a pain in his scar. He jumped in shock as he’d been free of the pain and the visions for so long, he’d forgotten about it. He could almost hear Moody’s voice in his head scolding him for not staying vigilant. He looked up in time to see Severus clutch his arm and wince, before passing out.

He leapt out of his seat, his own pain pushed to the back of his mind. He saw the rest of the class gaping and shuffling round, not knowing what to do. Hermione ran forward and knelt down on the opposite side of their Professor.

“We need to get him to Pomfrey now!” Harry declared and Hermione nodded.

“Do you think it’s safe to move him?” Hermione asked and Harry shrugged.

“Who cares? It’s only the greasy git!” Weasley yelled, coming over to gloat over the prone older man, flanked by Seamus and Lavender. A wary Dean was hovering in the background. Neville pushed past them and crouched down to see if he could help.

“Thanks Nev, can you run on ahead to the Hospital Wing, and Pansy? Can you go with him? Draco, can you go get your mother? Hermione and I will levitate him up to the wing. Everyone got that?” Harry barked out these orders, and the people mentioned ran off to do as he’d asked.

Ron looked a bit surprised by this cool and confident Harry, who was completely ignoring him. He and his cronies tried to get in the way of the two young Gryffindors and the stretcher they’d conjured for Severus, but were stopped by the other Defence Professors.

Remus had just finished his lesson and had seen Draco, Pansy and Neville go haring off in different directions. So he came to Severus’ classroom to see what the commotion was. Once he spotted the unconscious man, he’d yelled for Sirius, who also came running, having horrible visions of something being wrong with his husband or their baby. Both of the Professors ordered the belligerent Gryffindors out of the way and escorted the students and their patient up to the Hospital Wing.

Madam Pomfrey, forewarned by the breathless explanations of Pansy and Neville, descended on them as soon as they arrived.

“Potter, you stay. Rest of you outside, send in Professor Snape as soon as she arrives. Now shoo!” She said in a no-nonsense tone. They did as they were told, not wanting to invoke the wrath of the Hogwarts Medi-Witch. Harry stared at the pale man dazedly, until Poppy poked him with her wand. “Potter, explain.” She demanded. Harry shook his head to clear it, the pain lessening a little and then turned to the nurse.

“Well, I was sitting in Defence class with the Professor here, when all of a sudden, my scar started hurting. It wasn’t as bad as normal, but it startled me as it’s been the first time in months. I then looked up to the Professor and he clutched his arm. He seemed to be in a lot of

pain. He looked at me, and then he passed out.” Poppy was nodding while listening and scanning Severus. The doors slammed open then, and Belle rushed in.

“What happened? Is it the Dark Mark?” She said, yanking up her husband’s sleeve. She’d felt his pain through the bond and had met Draco halfway, already worried that something was wrong. True enough, there was the Mark, burning and blackening the skin around it. The three of them gasped as they watched. “So, he’s decided to kill my husband.” She spat, and Madam Pomfrey and Harry looked at her, confused. Then it clicked and Harry understood what was happening.

Voldemort was reaching out, through the link created by the Dark Mark, to kill his traitorous servant. It would take an awful lot of hate to kill that way, and that was why Harry could feel it, even through his shields. He winced as the pain came back a little stronger and Severus began to convulse. He took a step towards the bed, rubbing his forehead.

“What can we do?” He asked, looking at Belle. She shrugged, watching helplessly as her husband thrashed around on the bed. She looked at Harry, stricken and then back at the Mark. It looked to her as though the snake was moving. She tilted her head and then drew in a quick breath.

“Give me your hand!” She demanded and yanked Harry over to her. She slammed his hand down onto the Mark, hers resting on top of his, and he felt a jolt of pain crash into his mind. As soon as it came, it was gone and Harry turned accusatory eyes onto his Aunt.

“You could have warned me.” He admonished and she sighed.

“Sorry. But can you see it now? The link?” She asked and he looked back down at Severus’ arm. He could see it there, a sickly green strand wrapped round the Potion Master’s arm, twisting and coiling, strangling his magic.

“We need to sever it. It is connected to the serpent. I’ve been researching this, and have spent a great deal of time talking to Salazar. If we’re right, a simple incantation in Parseltongue should do

it. But Father will fight back, I'm sure. I need your help, your strength Harry. We both do." She explained and he nodded.

"What do I do?" He asked and she smiled.

Poppy Pomfrey stood back, watching all this happen, knowing there was nothing she could do for her patient. It frustrated and saddened her, when someone was brought in whom she could not help. She was glad that Professor Snape and Harry were here and seemed like they could do something. She did not want to speak badly of the Healers at St. Mungo's, but in a case like this they would probably call in the Ministry, who would want to study Severus like a lab rat.

She clamped down on her instinctive fears when she heard the two of them begin hissing, softly at first. They steadily grew louder, until they were almost shouting, a couple of windows cracked, wind howled though the ward and the beds clattered, being shaken by the force of the magic.

Then suddenly, it all stopped.

The room was calm again, and the two Parselmouths by the bed were silent, but breathing heavily. Poppy hurried over, handing them Pepper-Up potions, and quickly examined Severus.

The Mark was gone, and he was left with some nasty burns in various places on his body. She stripped him of his robes and applied salve to the burns, and then redressed him in a hospital gown. Once she was satisfied with his condition, she turned to the ones who had saved him. Comprehensive scans showed both of them were fine, and after a few minutes of quibbling, she relented and allowed them to summon the rest of the family.

They stood loosely around Severus' bed, waiting for him to wake. They were talking quietly to each other, Belle holding her husband's hand while she spoke with Harry and Remus. She turned to gaze at her mate as she felt him begin to stir. His eyes fluttered open, and he looked wearily at the people gathered there. Privately he was touched

by the number of people round his bedside. He's never had so many worry about him before. It was a humbling thing.

"Welcome back Snapey." Said Sirius with a cheeky grin and Severus grunted.

"It's good to have you with us, in the land of the living, Father." Said Draco, where he was holding a misty eyed Pansy.

"It's good to be back." He replied, and then he looked down at his arm. There was a bandage where he knew the Dark Mark to be, and he wordlessly turned to his wife, a question in his eyes. She smiled tremulously and nodded, instinctively understanding what he wanted to ask, but couldn't.

"It's gone, my love. You're free."

Chapter Twenty Five – Where Things Get a Bit Too Real

“The policy of being too cautious is the greatest risk of all.”

Jawaharlal Nehru (1889 - 1964)

“This is where she said....”

“I can’t believe it was here, all this time, and I never knew.”

“She said it didn’t want anyone to know. That it would only reveal itself when the time came.”

“Here we are. Now, where is the motif...?”

“...”

“Ah, here we go. A snake biting its own tail...”

“Symbol of Eternity.”

A sound of stones scraping slowly across each other, and then people coughing.

Someone chuckling.

“Oh laugh it up Sal! Just because you don’t need to breathe. Bloody ghosts!”

Even more laughing.

“Do you think Severus was surprised to find the Sword was hiding in his dungeons, and he didn’t know?”

“Hmm...I think he felt better when he knew The Great Salazar Slytherin didn’t know either.”

“Yep, that’s gotta do something for your ego.”

“ ... ”

“Eh? Did we just render 'The Greatest of the Hogwarts Four' speechless?”

“Nah, he’s cursing in Parseltongue...ouch! You kiss your Mother with that mouth?”

“ ... ”

“Ah, here we are. Go on Harry. Only you can touch it.”

“Um...”

“Go on; just grab the bloody thing so we can get out of here. I don’t anyone’s been down here for at least a hundred years, if not more, with all that dust.”

“Come on, get on with it!”

“ ... ”

“Hey, since we’re two floors below Snape’s classroom, think we can tunnel up instead of walking all the way back up there? I mean, it is right above us, yeah? Isn’t that what Pansy said?”

“Uh-huh. But I don’t think Hogwarts will be very happy with you just blowing holes in her mate.”

“Eh! Maybe Harry can sweet-talk her into making a short cut for us. She’s got a thing for him.”

“OK, as soon as he stops being a chicken and grabs that blooming sword, we can...”

Pansy was suddenly thrown violently out of the vision and slammed back into consciousness.

“Ow...” She complained as the force which had delivered the premonition and then expelled her from it, had given her a blinding

headache. To add insult to injury, she didn't even have any headache potions. She scrambled out of bed, and stumbled into the living room.

The pain was throbbing through her skull, and she tripped on the rug, falling into a side table. The crash as a vase fell to the floor and smashed, woke practically everyone in the suite. Doors were thrown open as sleepy faces looked out, trying to find the source of the noise.

Draco was closest and he saw the prone form of his sister on the floor where she'd landed.

"Pansy!" He yelled, rushing over to her and turning her over gently. She was mumbling, woozy as she'd struck her head on the corner of the table. "Pansy?" He said again, concern making his voice hoarse. By this time, the rest of the family had made it down the stairs and they tried to see what was happening, without crowding the pair. Severus knelt down opposite Draco and regarded his daughter worriedly.

"Pansy, can you hear me?" He asked, and paused for her to answer. But nothing came. She was still murmuring and the former spy leaned down to try and listen, hoping he might be able to understand some of it. Most of what she was saying was jumbled, but one word stood out amongst the confusion.

"...vision..." Severus sucked in a quick breath when he heard that. He hurriedly rose, and conjured a stretcher for the young girl, levitating her onto it.

"We must get her to Poppy. Now, Annabelle, I want you to go back to bed, in your condition..." But he was cut off by his determined wife.

"No, she's my daughter too Severus. I'm coming with you." She declared, crossing her arms over her ample abdomen. She was about five months along, and positively blooming. Snape had become increasingly anxious as her pregnancy progressed, though he hid it well. However, he was too scared for Pansy to try arguing with his wife right now, so he just shrugged.

"Come on then, we'd better get going. The rest of you though, really ought to go back to sleep. That includes you Draco." He said, and

without waiting for them to disagree, he left the room, carefully levitating Pansy's stretcher in front of him and Belle.

Dumbledore stood in his office, gazing out of the window. His mind was wandering over the events of the school year so far.

Things had become...complex.

With the addition of that woman onto the staff, his people had not been as easy to control as he would like. Since she'd poisoned them, they'd all began trying to play games with his mind. Now she was going to pollute his world even more with her...offspring. And if that wasn't enough, the werewolf would be whelping one of his own soon. He shuddered at how disgusting it all was. Not content to bring their shameful tendencies into his school, Remus and Sirius were barefaced enough to seem pleased about it all.

The situation was insupportable, he would not stand for it.

No, he would regain control of them all, somehow. He would re-establish his position as the most powerful man in the wizarding world. With the way things were now though, he wasn't strong enough; he would need to bind Harry again, maybe a bit more than last time, yes...that would be perfect. Sure the power drain he'd set up on the boy as a baby had been useful, but it would not be enough this time, he would need more...he would...

He didn't hear the person who slipped into his office, nor did he hear them whisper a stunner, before it was too late.

The next morning, Pansy awoke to find herself tucked up in a bed in the Hospital Wing with her Mother snoozing on the foot of her bed, one of her hands tightly holding Pansy's. Her Father was awake and watching her, concern and relief showing in his eyes. Pansy was overwhelmed by the sight, and had feelings akin to Severus' when he awoke in a similar fashion, after his episode with the Dark Mark.

In fact, much of the family and the staff had been amazed that it had taken Voldemort so long to decide to punish his wayward follower. A

report had filtered back to them, that he'd been ranting about how Severus would come back to him, and then one day he'd snapped out of his ravings and immediately summoned a Deatheater so he could use the link to kill Snape. They theorised, that the battle between man and demon had prevented him from taking any tangible action, and somehow, one of them must have won out briefly and taken decisive action. It was a worrying thought that no one knew whether it was Tom or Voldemort who decided to kill the Potions Master.

Pansy turned her attention back to the man who'd adopted her when she'd thought she would remain alone and nameless.

"Good Morning Pansy. I must say, you gave us quite a scare." Severus drawled in the voice his students were so accustomed to hearing. Then a tender smile twitched at the corner's of his mouth for a moment. "How do you feel daughter?" He asked quietly and she smiled.

"Much better than I did last night. Father I...had a vision..." Her voice trailed off as she remembered the pain the vision caused. Severus frowned when he saw the look on her face.

"Was it bad?" He asked bluntly. She shook her head.

"No, it's just after. It was very painful." She said, and went on to explain the general gist of what she'd seen, leaving out the specifics until the others got there. She looked over to a curtained off section of the ward and turned back curiously at Professor Snape.

"Albus..." He explained.

"Ah, intervention." Pansy said, and it wasn't a question. She knew of the plan to stop the Headmaster. "You know, we could all get into an awful lot of trouble over this." She added and he actually laughed a little.

"For shame Pansy dear! You sound just like Granger! Ow! Hey!" This came from Draco, who after such a flattering comment, shouldn't have been surprised that Hermione smacked him on the arm. Pansy turned to look at him as the rest of the family arrived, all with relieved

faces at seeing she was awake, but slightly confused as to what the trouble had been the night before.

"Honestly Draco! You have to think of the bigger picture sometimes. Sure, we know why we did what we did, but others may not see it that way. We'd better just hope that we can get him the help he needs before anything serious happens." Pansy scolded and Draco smiled, glad to see she was back to her old self again.

"I know, I know. So, what did you see?"

Pansy went on to recount her vision to the group and they analysed over it, trying to glean as much information as possible. They were surprised to hear the comment about Salazar's ghost; clearly he hadn't been completely honest with them. When Poppy gave Pansy the all-clear to leave, they went back to their rooms with a new found energy. They'd been in a bit of slump before when their search for the sword had turned up diddly-squat. Now, they knew where it was.

Severus, Minerva and Remus stayed behind with Hermione and Poppy, to discuss what to do about Albus. After a long examination and recitation of his symptoms, Poppy was happy to back up their relieving him of duty on medical grounds.

Her scans of his brain indicated a chemical imbalance, which seemed to have built up over time. A complex series of potions, taken over a set period, would correct the imbalance, and eliminate its cause. Severus left the infirmary in a hurry, going straight to his labs to brew the medications. The first potion would alleviate the symptoms to a point where the old man would be lucid again, and the former spy wanted to make sure that would be as soon as possible. They needed Dumbledore back, the real Dumbledore.

He asked the others to update the rest of the family on what was happening, and after a brief pause, Hermione decided to follow him to see if she could help.

While Hermione and Severus were buried under a cloud of potions fumes, Harry, Draco, Sirius and Blaise went with Salazar's ghost, to the place Pansy described, looking for Cadalbolg.

The Founder had been a mite sheepish when they rumbled him, but explained that he'd kept it a secret so that he could observe the progress of his beloved school from afar, without suspicion. He'd left under a cloud, and when he was older and wiser, he saw the error of his ways, but knew that his name would always be looked down on by 'Light' wizards. He was actually hoping that the deeds of this year's seventh year Slytherins, would help to dispel some of the stigma attached to their House.

They made their way swiftly down through the dungeons, following in the ghost's wake, stopping when the Marauder's Map indicated that they were directly below the Potions classroom. Guided by Pansy's description, they found the snake motif, and entered the hidden chamber, which wasn't marked on the map.

There, hanging in the centre of the room, seemingly unsupported by anything, was Cadalbolg. Created by the Gods to slay the creatures of the Abyss, the Celestial Weapon was beautiful in its simplicity. Harry gulped.

They'd found the sword.

"Shit." Harry muttered.

Chapter Twenty Six – In Which Forgiveness is Good for the Soul

“If you have made mistakes, even serious ones, there is always another chance for you. What we call failure is not the falling down but the staying down.”

Mary Pickford (1893 - 1979)

Dumbledore awoke, the morning light shining in his eyes, and wondered where he was. He blinked as he adjusted to the light, and slowly looked around. He must be in the Hospital Wing, he surmised. He could smell the clean white linens on the beds, and the faint odour of the potions Madam Pomfrey used. A patch of black fabric caught his attention, from the corner of his eye, and he turned to see his erstwhile friend and Potions teacher, reclining in a chair next to his bed, dozing. He silently wondered how he got here, everything was so...foggy.

He tensed a little as Severus stirred and opened his eyes. His black gaze found the anxious Headmaster and he smiled, a cautious, yet genuine smile. This rare event made Albus relax, and he tried to sit up in the bed. The younger man got up immediately and helped him, moving pillows, and making sure he was comfortable.

“How are you feeling?” Severus, asked. They’d administered the first potion the night before, minutes after the former spy had flown into the Hospital Wing, having just finished the medication. If Poppy’s prescriptions were correct, Albus should be himself again.

“I...I’ve been ill, haven’t I, old friend?” The great wizard replied, frowning in concentration. He tried to piece together the string of confusing images and memories which flashed through his mind.

“Yes, you have.” Severus stated simply.

“I...I...it’s all so confusing. I was...in shadows...and I couldn’t...Oh Merlin! The things I’ve done.” The Headmaster buried his face in his hands and started to sob. The ex-Deatheater didn’t hesitate, he got

up straight away and wrapped his arms round the broken man. Inwardly he marvelled at his actions. This time last year, he would never have done something like this. To him it was a poignant reminder as to how things had changed.

"It's OK, Albus. You weren't well, you weren't yourself. But you're better now, and we intend to make sure you stay that way." Snape reassured him, rocking him slightly.

"It was like a nightmare, like living in a waking nightmare, that slowly got worse and worse...I...I've hurt so many people..." Dumbledore was trying to regain his control, but it kept slipping back into his anguish, as the memories assaulted him.

"You know, there's nothing wrong with being upset. Annabelle constantly reminds me that you have to let it out, or it will build and build until you burst. And probably blow something up, considering we're wizards. It's alright to cry, she always says." Severus murmured in a soothing voice. He didn't let go as the Headmaster let out all his grief at his past actions. Eventually he stilled and Snape looked down to see he was asleep, having exhausted himself. He gently rearranged him in the hospital bed so he would be comfortable. He got up and stretched, feeling the aching in his bones.

He sat down again, in the chair he'd pulled up to the old man's bedside the night before. Despite everything, he had not wanted to leave him alone. Leave him, to awaken here, by himself, lost and confused. Which was how the Mediwitch had expected him to be. His true personality had become more and more suppressed, buried under the years of steadily growing psychosis. Albus' description of waking from a living nightmare was quite accurate. He was just as much a victim of his madness as everyone else. Though, it would take time for some to realise this.

"Hey you." He jumped slightly as his wife's soft voice woke him from his introspection. He cursed himself for not hearing her enter. Though, in his defence, she had admitted a while ago that she'd been practicing being stealthy, to see if she could sneak up on him. With his finely tuned spy-senses she didn't always manage it, but when she did, she found it vastly entertaining, apparently. He didn't scold

her, as his bad moods nearly always dissolved when he saw her belly, swollen with his child.

The first time he felt it move, his heart almost stopped. He couldn't get over the miracle of what he and his wife had created. He was overcome, and had to leave the room abruptly, still uncomfortable with strong emotions. Belle didn't mind though, she never tried to push him, or make him into someone he wasn't. He wryly admitted he was doing that, to himself.

He'd long since dismissed his worries about their rushed marriage after an even hastier reconciliation. How could he worry about it, when he was finally getting his heart's desire: a loving family. Not that he'd admit that where any of his students could hear. He still found it highly amusing to scare the bejesus out of them. Occasionally he felt the urge to stalk up behind one of them and shout 'BOO!', but didn't, it would hardly fit his reputation, after all. So, he settled to making them quake in their boots.

"How is he?" She asked, stopping by Albus' bed and taking one of his wrinkled hands in both of hers.

"He's lucid, thank Merlin. But very sad. He remembers some of what he's done while ill, and feels incredibly guilty. I tried to assure him that he's not responsible for his actions, but it will take time for him to forgive himself." Severus explained, looking at his old mentor with a sympathetic frown. Belle nodded.

"I understand. All we can do, is be supportive. I won't deny that a large part of me is still angry. But carrying hatred, is like carrying a live coal in your heart – far more damaging to yourself than the one you hate." She said quietly, not wanting to disturb the sleeping patient.

"Hate the sin, love the sinner?" Severus quoted and Belle smiled.

"Something like that." She replied with a chuckle. Then she turned to face him, not releasing the aged Headmaster's hand. "I didn't know you read Gandhi!" She declared and Severus chuckled.

"Oh, he's just full of surprises." Came from the bed, and both of them jumped. Seemed Belle wasn't the only one who could be stealthy.

"Hello Headmaster. I'm glad you're feeling better." Annabelle said with a warm smile. Albus' amusement faltered for a moment, his face darkening with shame as he remembered the way he'd treated this woman.

She'd come to him, a broken child, witness to her own Mother's murder, tortured by her Father, and he'd treated her no better than the dirt on his shoe. How could he have ever considered her a threat? She was a child. His heart twisted in pain.

"Now, now, none of that. It's in the past, and you weren't well. Poppy told me this has been building up for a long time. Since you were born in fact. It's been influencing you and twisting your reasoning for years, ever increasing, until you had lost all lucidity and any ability to rationalise. You mustn't be too hard on yourself." Dumbledore's expression was a mixture of doubt and hope, and he gasped when she placed his hand on her tummy and he felt the baby kick. "We have to look to the future now." She added quietly.

Severus rose from his chair and moved to stand beside his wife, placing his hand over Albus' where it rested on her pregnant belly. The three of them were held there, almost in a trance as they stared at each other, feeling the new life move under their hands.

They were broken from this reverie when Poppy bustled through the door and began examining the Headmaster, clucking about taking proper care of himself and not overdoing it. He could be released almost immediately, and Belle and Severus cajoled him into coming down to the family rooms. It was Sunday and there wasn't anything particular to do. Plus, Harry had discovered the sword the night before, and they needed to fill the old man in on everything they'd found out. As they walked the corridors slowly so neither Dumbledore nor Belle would tire, Annabelle remembered Harry's pale demeanour when he'd returned last night.

He walked in, wide eyed and pale faced, the sword clutched in his arms. He didn't say anything to anyone, he just walked up to his

favourite chair, plonked himself down in it, and stared straight ahead. Even Hermione couldn't rouse him, which left them all worried.

When trying to talk to him proved completely pointless, the rest of them questioned the group that went with them.

"It was bizarre. We told him to get on with it and grab the sword, and he looked pretty scared. When he touched it he was covered in bright blue and gold light, and then he stepped back, completely blank. Like he is now." Blaise explained, and Remus looked at him curiously.

"Scared?" He repeated and they all shrugged. Salazar glided forward, and hovered in front of the fire, legs crossed in a meditative pose.

"I believe the discovery of Cadwalgar reminded Harry that he will be the one to kill Voldemort. This he already knew, but I believe the phrase is that it 'brought home' the impending battle. He is in his current condition, because he is communing with the weapon. It instructs him, on what he must do, and it is aligning their energies and magic, so that man and sword may be as one." The Founder explained, and the others looked awed.

A loud sob brought their attention to Hermione. She was sitting in the window seat where Harry had spoken to Severus and Sirius all those months before. After her initial outburst she had clamped her hands over her mouth, in an attempt to stop herself from crying. She screwed her face up, wrestling with her emotions, but they would not be controlled. She burst into full blown hysterics, great sobs wrenching through her small body.

Most of men looked at each other, lost, not knowing what to do. Remus, Belle and Pansy tsked them, and made their way over to the distraught girl. Belle sat in front of her, while Remus sat behind, pulling her into his arms, her head resting on his rounded stomach. Pansy went to get her a glass of water, after asking if she would like one. After a time, her sobs lessened, until she was sniffing quietly, hiccupping slightly. The distress was still evident in her eyes.

"Hermione love, what's the matter?" Remus asked gently, and Hermione scrunched her face up, another attack looming. She closed her eyes, and took deep breaths, calming herself some.

"It's just...it's always Harry, isn't it? He...he can change his name, and have all of us, and everything. But...he just...it's always down to him. It's not right! It's not fair! The Fates be damned! This is all such bollocks!" Hermione swearing so coarsely raised more than one eyebrow. She wasn't finished though. "Why should he have to do this alone? Isn't that what's wrong with the world? People not working together, taking responsibility, relying on one person to fix everything for them. Why him? Why does he have to do this? He's only a man..." She buried her face in her hands again, only to have them pulled away with a gentle insistence.

Harry had heard her tirade, and it touched him that she felt so strongly for him, and cared about his life. Academically, he'd known she cared, she'd demonstrated it so many times. But, he felt it now. It was like a burning, not an unpleasant one, but a reassuring warmth, filling him with a happy glow.

"Hey, love. Please don't cry. It sucks, I know, but we've got each other, yeah?" He said, kneeling in front of her. He tilted her head up, one finger resting under her chin and smiled into her red, puffy eyes. She smiled tremulously back at him, and sniffed a little. He pressed a brief, chaste kiss on her lips and then stood up. He helped her up off Remus lap, and wordlessly led her to his room. When the door shut behind them, everyone felt the privacy charms which were thrown up and smiled. It was about time!

Belle was brought back into the present when Severus muttered the password. This week, it was *'la divination suce'*. Which roughly translated as 'Divination Sucks'. Pansy may be a Seer, but she had no respect for the numerous fraudsters who practiced the 'Art' of Divination. Dumbledore spoke French apparently, as he chuckled quietly when he heard it. There were a few wary looks from various family members as they walked in, but most looked away when Belle and Severus glared at them.

Harry had been wrestling with his feelings since he found out about the old man's illness and the possible treatment. Rationally, he knew and understood that Albus wasn't responsible for his actions. His brain had been interfered with for nearly the last twenty years,

according to Snape and Pomfrey. But it wasn't as simple as clicking your fingers and everything would be OK. He would try though.

The aged wizard looked very nervous, and was anxiously flicking glances at the people gathered in the room. His noticeable distress caused the hostile gazes the family had been directing at him to soften.

This clearly was not the same man.

Harry approached him slowly, and when he was standing in front of him, he smiled, a gentle half smile.

"I'm Harry Black, nice to meet you." He said, offering his hand to the worried man. Dumbledore hadn't lost any of his intelligence, and caught on straight away to what Harry was suggesting. They could start afresh, get to know each other properly and honestly, as equals. It was more than he could ever hope for. He shook Harry's hand earnestly, smiling in gratitude.

"Good to meet you Mr. Black. May I call you Harry?" He asked and Harry nodded. This caused a round of introductions, everyone in the family following Harry's lead. The message was clear: Dumbledore was being offered a chance at redemption, to earn the respect and trust of the people in the room. Some of whom, he'd wronged the most.

After a while, they got down to the business of the War, and everything they'd found out. Albus was genuinely surprised and impressed with the amount of information they'd gathered. He also knew of a potion that could help Pansy with her visions. It was very rare, and he only knew about it because his Mother was a Seer, and suffered dreadful backlash from the Sight. He gave the recipe to Severus who promised to make it as soon as possible.

He promised the support and help of the Order of the Phoenix, for whatever struggle was ahead of them. It was here that Sirius voiced something he'd been considering for some time.

“Listen, everyone. I don’t think a head on confrontation is the answer here. And it’s doesn’t fit Pansy’s vision either. If Albus’ spies can give us Voldie’s location, a small group may be able to slip behind enemy lines, as it were. They’d have more chance of reaching him than an all out assault, and it would, hopefully, minimise losses on our side. I’ve been thinking about this for a while, and it seems the best solution. As far as I can see though, there are two major stumbling blocks: the location of his Headquarters, and the rest of the Deatheaters.” Sirius explained and a few people turned to look at him surprised. Of course, the image of the Peter-Pan-Boy-Who-Never-Grew-Up meant that most people forgot he was an Auror. A damn good one too. He didn't mind though, as it was easier to get someone to do something or talk freely around you, if they thought they were more clever than you.

“The mutt is right, if we can eliminate those two variables, we can organise a workable attack strategy. Whatever is controlling Tom seems to think along very direct lines. A small strike team is not something he would consider. He or It still seems to be stuck in a time warp and seems to prefer the melodrama of two armies facing off against each other on a vast battlefield.” Severus scoffed at the last bit and Draco snorted.

“Idiotic megalomaniac.” He murmured and Severus nodded in agreement. Harry rose to stand on the rug in front of the fireplace, everyone’s eyes on him. He smiled.

“So then, we have a plan.”

Chapter Twenty Seven – In Which the End Begins

“An Englishman, even if he is alone, forms an orderly queue of one.”

George Mikes

Remus Black was lying on a bed in the hospital wing, having his three weekly check up with Madam Pomfrey. He was now nearly five months along, and Poppy wanted to keep a close eye on him. Male pregnancies were risky at best, and the added strain of his being a werewolf didn't help. What was strange however, was that he didn't transform while he was pregnant. No one could explain why though. It was a matter of great interest to Severus, who was wondering if the effect could be duplicated on non-pregnant werewolves. For once, Remus didn't mind being poked and prodded by the potions master, who was busy researching the Wolfsbane, when he wasn't helping with the attack preparations.

Remus was hardly paying any attention at all, to the Mediwitch, as he silently worried about the safety of his family. Most of them would be going with the raiding party, but Sirius had ordered him to stay at the castle. He hadn't protested however, as he knew his husband was right. He needed to stay here, it was too dangerous for him, in his condition.

Severus only wished he could use the same excuse as Sirius, and make his spouse stay behind with Remus. But Pansy's vision showed that she was there, and so he couldn't have stopped her. He found himself wanting to bite his nails, as he fretted over her and their children. He put it aside as best he could though, determined that fear would not rule his life.

He was currently sat at the breakfast table, next to his wife, reading the Prophet, while the others talked around him. He sipped his tea and occasionally snorted or scoffed at the articles in the paper. A spluttering next to him roused him from his reading.

"You've put milk in my tea!" Belle accused. Severus raised an eyebrow and wondered how best to handle this. To say that his wife was unpredictable was a gross understatement.

"You always have milk in your tea." He replied mildly. Belle slammed her cup down.

"I know! Every single day of my life, I have milk in my tea. But today, I've changed my mind! And you don't know about it, because you don't care!" She tried to get up and storm off but was having trouble, her manoeuvrability severely impaired by her considerable bulk. "I..." She huffed. She tried again, but couldn't get the right leverage. The table was silent as they watched all this happen.

"Belle..." Began Severus, but he stopped at her vicious scowl. She rose one more time, but didn't have much luck. She only got so far, before she fell back onto her seat. She turned round; attempting a sideways manoeuvre, but still couldn't find purchase with which to push herself out of the chair.

"A little help, might be nice...IF IT'S NOT TOO MUCH TROUBLE!" She yelled. Severus and Sirius immediately jumped up to help her, Remus joining them and making sympathetic noises.

Annabelle's emotions were all over the shop. They'd settled down for a while, but what with the recent stress, they'd gone haywire. Her moods had turned mercurial, changing in a split second. She was crying now, and her husband wasn't having much luck in calming her. Remus tsked him and shooed him off, leading Annabelle to her room.

"Hey now, come on. Why don't you have a nice nap, hmmm?" Remus suggested, as they took the steps one at a time. Belle mumbled something back and the werewolf chuckled.

"Husbands, eh? They just don't understand." He soothed her and Sirius and Snape exchanged long suffering glances. The rest of the family were still gathered round the breakfast table, most covering their faces, trying not to laugh. Snape slumped into his chair, and almost started banging his head on the table. This made the others' control waver, and Sirius could have sworn he heard a rather unladylike snort from Pansy.

“Now, um, Severus. It’s really not that bad. She’s only got a few months to go, and then guess what? You’ll have a little bouncing baby. Er, half you and half her, um...won’t that be, ah, cute?” The animagus tried to comfort his, um, brother in law. That tore it though, and the entire breakfast table exploded with laughter.

Harry was sat in his favourite place in their rooms, the window seat looking over the lake, when suddenly; there was a soft knock at the door. Sal’s ghost drifted in and told him it was Dumbledore. Harry frowned, and wondered why the old man was here, considering it was one o’clock in the morning. He shrugged though, and left his comfy cushions to go and open the door. He held a finger to his lips to stop the Headmaster from talking, and gestured for him to follow him to the window. Once there, they set up charms so they wouldn’t disturb the others.

“Now, what are you doing here at this time of night? Shouldn’t you be resting?” Harry scolded his Professor, who smiled warmly at the younger man’s coddling.

“I could say the same for you Harry.” He replied and then his face darkened a little. “You didn’t have another nightmare or vision did you?” He asked, concerned that Harry might have been suffering. The young saviour smiled, considering how the Headmaster had become a different man, since his treatment began. If he’d had a vision before, there would have been minimal sympathy and intense questioning, so that every piece of possible information could be squeezed from the young man’s mind. Now, the opposite was true.

Severus was by no means the only source of information in Tom’s ranks. True, he had been the only one so highly placed, but after the Department of Mysteries, his loyalty had been questioned and he had been effectively demoted within the hierarchy. Dumbledore’s attitude to visions now, was that any way they could be prevented, should be pursued.

“No, I was just thinking.” Harry replied vaguely.

“About?” Albus prompted and the corner’s of Harry’s mouth quirked a little.

“About life, choice, fate. All that.” He said and Dumbledore nodded.

“Ah, heavy thoughts for a seventeen year old.” He declared and Harry chuckled. Both knew he was more than seventeen, at least, on the inside.

“Perhaps.” Was all he said.

“And what prompted these deep thoughts?” Albus pressed, and Harry frowned.

“Can’t you guess? ‘The End is Nigh’, as it were.” Harry said, and Albus just smiled, confident there was more. Harry picked at the laces of his trainers and looked out the window, watching the squid roll around in the water.

“I began thinking of Tom, and how all this happened. It made me wonder, how much is laid out, and how much is chance? What if he hadn’t gone into the woods, and been taken by that ‘thing’? Would he have still been evil? Or just dark, like Snape? Would he have still married Léonie? Or would he have never met her? If he hadn’t, then Annabelle wouldn’t exist. Which would mean, the new baby wouldn’t exist either. Does everything happen for a reason? If so, why was it Tom’s fate to be imprisoned inside his own body, by a monster?” Harry blurted all this out, and Albus sat back for a moment.

“I thought the possession was just a theory.” He said quietly, feeling guilty once more, for sending young Tom Riddle back to the orphanage. If he had followed his heart, and adopted the boy, instead of listening to his fears, would any of this have happened? Who knew?

“Oh, I’m sure of it. Cadalbolg knows. It’s a demon alright.” Harry paused for a moment. “I can feel it.” He added, and the Headmaster nodded.

“I can’t possibly imagine what it must be like to be...bonded...to something so ancient, and so...alien.” He said and Harry laughed softly.

"Neither can I, Headmaster. It's something like a child, in its goodness, and innocence. It is something so different and good, that when I concentrate on it, I, like, go into this trance. I can't describe it. When I'm there, just floating, I feel finished, complete. It takes me away from here, and actually, that scares me a little." He sighed and Albus made, 'go on' motions with his hands. Harry took a deep breath, and released it slowly. "Well, I can't let my mind focus on it too much, or sometimes, I think I might not want to come back." He explained quietly.

"A pure form of escapism." Dumbledore said, and Harry nodded in acknowledgement.

"It makes me wonder, sometimes, what is going to happen to me...after. Will the sword let me be? Will it sever its bond? Or will it always be there, on the edge of my mind. Posing the cruellest temptation of all." Harry said, and Dumbledore looked sad for a minute. Then he smiled, and that infernal twinkle was back.

"You could always ask it, you know." He suggested and Harry gaped for a moment.

"Why, I...had not...oh, bloody hell!" He swore, and closed his eyes. Albus waited patiently, hands folded in his lap, while his favourite student communed with the Celestial Weapon. After a little while, Harry opened his eyes, and directed a scowl at the older wizard.

"Alright. It says it will be collected by its owner, whoever that is, when the demon has been banished." He explained and Dumbledore grinned, like a Cheshire cat. Harry's scowl deepened, until it was almost Snape-like. "Yes, yes, don't even think about saying 'I told you so.'"

"The thought hadn't even considered, even the slightest possibility, of crossing my mind." Albus replied, and Harry snorted.

"Yeah, and on the weekends, Snape likes to be called Mandy." He replied. Albus frowned.

"You know, there have always been rumours..."

“It makes you wonder, if those sayings about madness and genius, are a load of old tosh.” Said Tonks, who, along with Moody, Shackbolt and Dumbledore, had joined the family in their well warded suite to plan their sortie into enemy territory. Along with them, was Neville Longbottom, who had been recruited by Moody, for some purpose the others didn’t know about.

Tonks’ comment was directed towards the recent discovery, that Tom was currently residing in Riddle Manor, with no intentions of moving elsewhere. Since they knew exactly where the Manor was located, namely, Little Hangleton, it was rather stupid, or a lot stupid, of Tom to stay there.

“I told you all, a long time ago, that he was an idiot. But it's more than that. The demon, among other things, possesses overwhelming arrogance. A creature of that kind doesn't know the meaning of hiding, or retreating. The only time it did anything like that, was when it was non corporeal. And even then, it didn't back down. It went on searching, for a new host. Then it found Tom, and well. You know the rest.” Belle said them, and the family nodded. The three Aurors gave her a strange look, but didn’t comment. Moody spread a large map on the table, and began marking off areas.

“Now, here is where his outer perimeter begins. The weakness there, is this copse of trees. This first defence is not warded, just patrolled. They have it as more of an early warning system, and a way of watching the locals. The real trouble, is this next line here.” He indicated, drawing a red line, to show the location of the wards. “This will trigger, unless it’s deactivated somehow. We’ve managed to find out, that he’s not maintaining it himself – he’s using crystals.” Moody declared and some of the others frowned.

“ Crystals?” Theo asked and Hermione nodded.

“That’s fairly standard. You’d need an anchor to hold wards for so long, and to hold them personally, is a great strain.” She looked to Albus then. “Even with the castle as an anchor, I can’t imagine how you do it.” She said and he smiled.

"The castle, she is a great help. And the wards around the school have been in place for more than a thousand years. They are almost self-sustaining." He replied and she nodded.

"He'll probably have a separate ward around the master crystal." Snape said, looking at the map. He turned to his wife. "Do you think you'd be able to penetrate it, unharmed?" He asked and the three Aurors looked at her curiously for a moment, before remembering who she was.

"If he stays to true to form. It'll most likely be one which checks for a Slytherin blood relationship. If so, then it should be fine. It's just..." She replied and Severus stood up and put an arm round her.

"What is it?" He asked and she frowned.

"It's too easy. Why isn't he making this harder for us?" She protested and Severus was stumped.

"If I may, Madame Snape?" Kingsley said quietly, and Belle jumped. Kingsley coughed a little, embarrassed when everyone turned to look at him, and took a deep breath. "This won't be easy, if you can't get through his wards. If you think about it, if it weren't for your, ah, familial relationship, this would be a lot harder. We would have to pull the wards down, a bit at a time, alerting his forces to our presence, opening ourselves to attack. If you can touch the master crystal, you should be able to key us into the wards. Hopefully, that will afford us minimal detection if any." He explained and Moody nodded.

"Once past that barrier, things get fun. We should be able to enter the house here, by this door into the old conservatory. Young Neville here, is a loremaster, and has agreed to accompany us, and ask the plants to let us through. Otherwise, it would be impossible to reach that door, the whole place being so overgrown." Alastor said, showing them the access point on the map.

There was stunned silence for a moment, while everyone's attention shifted to the bashful young man. Neville shuffled his feet a little, unused to the awed gazes.

“Wow, Neville mate! You kept that one under wraps!” Said Blaise, walking over to give the blushing boy a slap on the back.

“Too right. Congratulations mate, that’s a real achievement.” Said Theo, who was on the other side of the shy Gryffindor. Hermione came over to give him a hug, Pansy, Harry and Draco hot on her heels.

“That is so amazing! Why didn’t you tell us? I’ve read about loremasters, they’re really rare! In fact, the last known one was mphpmh!” The rest of Hermione’s tirade was cut off by Sirius, who felt that now was not the time for a book recitation, and so he’d clapped a hand over her mouth. She looked angry at first, but smiled sheepishly, when he pointed out how red the young man had gone already.

“I, um, didn’t want to make a big deal out of it...” He began, but his voice trailed off with nerves when Snape approached him. Despite the lack of hostility from the Professor of late, Neville still wasn’t over his fear of the potions master.

“Now I understand why Potions was never your forte. I would be the same, if forced to chop up and boil things that I could speak with, and that were my friends. I’m very sorry I asked you to do that, Mr Longbottom.” Severus said, offering his hand to the shocked boy. Neville hesitated a moment, and then slowly shook his hand. Severus smiled and then returned to his wife, not wanting to scare the boy any more, with his proximity.

“Right then, back to the map!” Moody ordered, and they all hopped to it. Here Tonks took up the narrative.

“So, we’re inside.”

A/N: Special thanks to FyreFlyODoom, for the generous permission of using the Neville as a Loremaster idea. I got it from the 'Learning and Teaching' series, which, if you haven't read it yet, you definitely should. It's excellent!

Please review!

Chapter Twenty Eight – Where Tomorrow is Just One Day More

“Not even the gods fight against necessity.”

Simonides (556 BC - 468 BC), *from Plato, Dialogues, Protagoras*

Harry was in the Astronomy Tower, standing, looking out over the landscape. Scotland, was achingly beautiful. Many people disparaged it, because of the weather, but for a select group, who realised the true majesty of this ancient and noble country. Tourists came, and rarely understood. He himself didn't believe he really understood this place. But he felt privileged to be able to walk its land, and see its stunning vistas.

Tonight, he had begged the family for some time to himself. He felt bad, because he knew Hermione needed comfort, and he wanted to give it to her, but ever since he bonded with the sword, there was a distance, between him and his emotions. He didn't feel right about being that intimate with her, when he couldn't put his whole heart into it. She wasn't happy about it, but she understood. All he could hope, was that he would be alive after everything, and could make it up to her.

Tonight, was the eve before their mission. Tomorrow, he would go with his friends, infiltrate Voldemort's home, and kill him. He lay back on the cold stone, and gazed up at the stars. His mind was far away, unable to focus on his current situation. He didn't notice the uneven surface of the tower, digging into his back. He didn't notice the chill which was sinking into his bones.

Tomorrow, he would have to kill a man. Despite everything, it did not sit well with him.

Earlier that evening, there had been an Order meeting. It wasn't the easiest of discussions, for even though the Black and Snape families were allied with Dumbledore, and had the support of the three Aurors, the others were still distrustful of them. Particularly the Weasleys.

Well, the Weasleys minus the twins. The meeting had started off reasonably well, as the Headmaster filled everyone in on the plan. But when it came down to who would actually be going, that was when the fight really got started.

"I can't believe you're trusting these...people...to go on this 'mission'!" Declared Molly Weasley. Harry privately wondered what she had really wanted to call them, instead of 'people'. And he wasn't the only one.

"Now Molly," Began Dumbledore, but he was interrupted by Ron.

"It's just some elaborate hoax! So they can go and join their master! Filthy Deatheaters!" He spat, and more than one person in their room rolled their eyes at his abject stupidity.

"Really Weasley, you really ought to try and engage that miniscule brain of yours before you speak." Said Snape, whose sneer was in top form that evening. The strain of the last few months of his wife's pregnancy was getting to him, and he wasn't prepared to go easy on this lot.

"How dare you!" Molly cut in and Severus sneered at her as well.

"If you stopped and thought about it, for even a minute, you would see that if we were going to join our 'master', as you put it, we would not have told you. We would have just gone." Came the quiet voice of Blaise, who was stood by the windows, in the Headmaster's office, where the meeting was being held. Most of the redhead's scowled at him and ignored him.

"What would a dirty Slytherin know?" Muttered Ron.

The argument raged back and forth between the Weasleys and various Snape and Black family members. Only Harry, Belle and Remus stayed silent on their side, and the twins, Bill and Charlie stayed silent on the other side. Dumbledore sat between them, their wrangling setting his nerves on edge. He was in the final stages of his treatment, but he could almost feel a relapse coming on.

He'd only himself to blame, of course. True, the Weasleys thought for themselves, to some extent, but he started this, when he ordered them to make friends with Harry. To turn him from anything to do with Slytherin and Dark Wizards. It wasn't all bad, however. If Harry had gone into Slytherin, like he should have done, he may have been murdered in his sleep, years ago. Then again, he may have been able to redeem the house and its reputation. Who knew? All Dumbledore knew, was that when this was over, and maybe even before, he had some bridges to build, and some fences to mend.

"I say we send that disgusting, bitch and her spawn of the devil, back to her Father and let them both rot in Azkaban. Or better yet, let the Dementors have them!" This, unsurprisingly, came from Ronald Weasley, who was pointing at Annabelle. And, also unsurprisingly, at this, Snape lost his temper, having been holding onto it with a fine thread for the last hour.

"I will no longer sit here and listen to the blathering of ignorant fools! Weasley's pointless rhetoric is wasting all of our time. If you want to sit here and throw accusations at your allies, be my guest! Only don't complain to me when the Dark Lord strikes you down and destroys you, while you're busy condemning your friends!" He got up to storm out the office, but was stopped Harry's voice.

"We must go to Riddle Manor tomorrow. We must seek out Voldemort, and we must kill him. Pansy's vision has told us who will be there, so that is who must go. We need the help of everyone, if we're going to pull this off, because I don't like the odds, if we're not all together on this one. And personally? I want to come back alive." He paused and everyone's eyes were on him. He looked to his girlfriend, who'd had to suffer so much, by being with him. Sure, he knew, that she would have been a target anyway, but still.

"I want a life of my own to live, and to love. I love Hermione, and I want a chance to see if what we have, is something that can last. If we don't do this, if we don't go after him, and kill him, then I'll never have that chance, we'll never have that chance. I'm not above asking for help." He paused again, while he stroked the feathers of Fawkes, who had taken up residence in his lap, the minute he arrived. The beautiful phoenix trilled a soothing melody, while it gazed happily at

the young wizard. Harry looked up then, determination evident in his blazing green eyes.

"I know you're suspicious, and you have doubts. And I know you're scared." He looked at the faces of the people in the Order. "I'm scared too. But it must be done. And we can't do it without you, all of you. So, please?" He waited, and slowly, the others nodded their agreement.

"I know you asked to be alone." Came a voice from the doorway. Harry chuckled quietly.

"But since when has that ever stopped you?" He said, and the person walked forwards, grinning unrepentantly.

"Well, we Marauders have never done what we are told you know. No one bars our way, we go where we want!" The person declared, coming over and lying down next to Harry.

"You make whatever excuse you like Padfoot. We both know you're really hiding from your scary pregnant husband." Harry replied and Sirius laughed harder.

"True. Just don't tell him that, eh?" He said and Harry smiled.

"Don't worry, I won't. " He promised. "Besides, it's Remus. He probably already knows."

"True, true." There was a pause. "So, how do you think you'll feel, when this is all over? Relieved?" Sirius asked, and Harry frowned, considering it.

"You know, I have this odd inkling, that's it's going to be somewhat anticlimactic." Harry began, and Sirius sniggered. "I'm serious, you know? Like New Year's Eve, that's always a massive anticlimax. Big count down to midnight, and then what? My situation isn't all that different you know." Harry stopped for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

"It's like this, right: you have this big build up, man tries to kill baby, curse rebounds, weird, grey, cloudy, soul thingy wanders the Earth for thirteen years...gets his body back in bizarre graveyard ritual...battles and curses are thrown, some harsh words are exchanged. There's kidnappings and fake deaths...all that drama...and when it comes down to it, it'll be like, 'I've got this rather large sword, see this pointy bit here?' And then like, 'Bosh! You're dead!' D'you get it?" Harry said and Sirius looked at him oddly. "What?" Harry demanded and a worried furrow appeared in the older man's brow.

"Have you been at the firewhiskey? Or worse, did you find Snape's stash?" He asked, and Harry started laughing.

"Snape doesn't have a stash!" He protested and Sirius sat up, also laughing.

"Oh, but he's gotta! Man like that, all those contacts! More than a decade teaching idiots. Something's got to get him through the day! You know he's got to have some good stuff somewhere." He declared and Harry only laughed harder. Sirius sighed and laid back down.

"Padfoot, I really don't think he's on anything. Apart from Scotch maybe. But in all honesty, I really don't know what I'll feel when this is all over. I guess, part of me...will be a little lost. Cadalbolg told me, that when the demon is banished, and Tom dies, our connection will be cut off, severed. But it'll be like, snapped. So it could hurt. Then the sword will break its bond with me too. I'm thinking I might be feeling a little empty, when all that happens. For one thing, the link with old Voldy, it's been there a long time. I'm kind of used to it." Harry mused and Padfoot snorted.

"Are you telling me you're going to miss it?" He asked, disbelief dripping from his tone.

"Well yeah, maybe a little. It's a part of me, you know? I'm not saying it's a part of me that I want to keep, far from it. But I can't deny it's there, or that it won't feel weird, when it's gone. That's all." He explained and his Godfather nodded.

“And do you think you’ll be able to do it? Kill him, I mean.” Sirius asked and Harry sighed. Padfoot sat up again, and leant back on his hands, so he could look Harry in the eyes. “Because although we haven’t had that much time together, I do know you, Bambi. And I know, a viper you may be, but a killer? I really don’t think you are, it’s not in you.” He said and Harry looked sad.

“Well, after tomorrow it will be. Though, I spent some time in my other form, over the last few weeks, going over all this. The viper is much calmer than I am, less ruled by his emotions, so it helps, you know? And I started thinking about it this way: from what Salazar tells me, the damage done to Tom’s body by the possession, is irreparable. Even if we were to heal the chest wound, once the demon is banished, there would be no way to heal the damage done to his heart. He would be in constant pain, would probably be confined to bed, and one nasty cold virus, would finish him off. So as much as I will be killing him, and I know I will be, it’s well...” Harry ran a hand through his hair, not sure what to say.

“Euthanasia.” Sirius finished for him, and Harry nodded.

“Yeah.” Harry replied, and the other man laid back down again.

“You know, I would do anything, to take this responsibility away from you. But I know I can’t. I worry, about how you’ll live, after all this is done. How any of us will. People don’t like heroes, not really. I’m afraid, of how the public will treat you. Treat us. They set people up, build them up really high, put them on pedestals even. And then they knock ‘em down. They enjoy it when they fail, splashing it across the newspapers like it’s entertainment.” Harry’s adoptive Father said. Harry smiled.

“I know Dad. But, there’s all of us now. Neither of us is alone anymore.”

Harry and Sirius eventually got up from the cold stone floor, and made their way quietly downstairs, to their family rooms. The others were all still up, sitting on various armchairs, talking quietly. The mood was definitely sombre. Harry knew they needed something from him, a family pep talk of sorts. So, he sat on the rug, cross

legged, in front of the fireplace. He summoned Dobby and had him distribute drinks to everyone.

"We've come a long way, haven't we?" He said and the rest of his family smiled, nodding. "From the happy family we were, over the summer. Oh, I'm not denying we're a happy family now, at least, with each other, but events have a way of catching up with us, don't they?" There were a few soft chuckles, and Harry stood up, pacing in front of the fire.

"I don't know why this responsibility has been placed on us, but I do know, as much as we'd all like to run for the hills, none of us will. And maybe that's why we were chosen. Who knows? I don't think we ever will." He stopped his pacing and sat down again. He looked at Neville, who'd they'd asked to join them tonight, and who looked rather awkward.

"It's bizarre how much one person, can affect so many lives. As much evil as Voldemort has perpetrated, he did bring us all together, and I can't be sad about that. I wish my parents were here. But I also don't want to give up the love of my new parents either. Tomorrow, should not be about revenge. However, I am not so pure of heart, that the desire, no, the thirst for vengeance won't be there, isn't there now. Of course it will, and is. But we also go, to release Tom from the waking nightmare his life has become. I know it's a lot to ask, and I don't know if it is something even I can do, but please. Forgive him. Hate Voldemort if you want to, no one is asking you not to. But don't hate Tom, forgive him, and let him rest." Harry said, and everyone in the family looked at him.

They wondered, all of them, how fate would let a young man suffer through so much, that he would be so old, at only seventeen. Seventeen, was still a baby, in most people's eyes. They all had their hopes, of what life would be like, after tomorrow. And tomorrow, was only one more day. It would be by no means easy, but now that the end was in sight, the pressure was lifting for most of them.

Harry stood before his family, looking at each determined face. They had all lost and given so much. And now, one last time, he needed them to give that little bit more. He raised his glass.

“We will stand together, side by side. To the end!” He declared and they raised theirs in unison.

“To the end!”

Please review! I want to get to my 300th review on this fic before it's finished. Thanks!

Chapter Twenty Nine – Where the Hunt Begins

“Do not protect yourself by a fence, but rather by your friends.”

Czech Proverb

Hermione was sitting in Harry's favourite seat in their quarters, by the window, looking out over the lake. Harry was currently attending his final lesson of the day, while she had a free period. She was hugely impressed that he was still taking his NEWTS seriously, though she had to admit a lot of that was due to her and Remus' nagging. Harry was an awful lot more clever than he let on; he just rarely applied it to his school work.

In fact that was part of why they made such a good team, a good couple. There was balance between them. She, was far more academic, and had acquired a great deal of factual knowledge. Yet she lacked the experience and the wherewithal to apply it in a practical sense. Unless it was Potions or something like that.

She was sitting in the seat he usually occupied every night, because she needed the comfort it could offer. He was here so often it was like he left a piece of his aura there. She needed comfort, because she was afraid. The fear of what they were going to do that night, when Harry and the others still tied up in lessons returned, had got a hold of her heart, and she was finding it hard to cope. She had no problem admitting, that at times like this, she was lost without him. She had hoped that they could have been...closer, at least in the physical sense, before this task of theirs. But he'd denied her, and though she was initially angry, she understood his reasoning.

“Penny for them?” Harry's voice startled her from her introspection. She smiled tremulously and he saw the tears gathering in the corner of her eyes. “Oh, Hermione!” He declared softly, and he pulled her into his arms. She sniffed a bit, and he murmured comforting nonsense while she cried.

"I...I'm just scared Harry. What if...?" Hermione began, but Harry shushed her.

"Hermione, what was it you were saying to me just the other week, about 'what ifs'? Hmm?" He asked, resting his head on hers while she burrowed into his chest. He felt her heave a great sigh, before she spoke.

"The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty; not knowing what comes next. Otherwise we would have no reason to live. But that's not the point here Harry." She protested and he pulled away a little, to look in her eyes.

"Then what is the point love?" He asked, smiling, and she rolled her eyes at him, in exasperation.

"Harry! The point, is, that we know what is going to happen. We know who and what we're going to face, and that is what scares me. I can't believe you're being flippant at a time like this!" She declared, throwing her hands up, and moving away a little, though not leaving the circle of his arms.

"Hermione, please. I'm not being flippant, at least, not on the inside." He chided and she had the good grace to look a little sheepish.

"No, I suppose you aren't. It's just..." He shushed her again, with a finger to her lips.

"I understand, my love. I'm scared too, but we have to do this. And we're going to do this, but you're forgetting one salient point." Harry said, and she raised her eyebrows in question, unable to speak, due to the silencing finger. "We're going to do it together, all of us. There'll be you, talented and beautiful – a rare combination, I'm sure you'll agree." He paused while he looked round at the family, who were congregating in the living room, along with their allies. "There's Draco there, look. I have it on good authority, that he plans to lay a trap for our enemies, something involving hair gel and a sticking charm." He winked at the mildly offended blond, who just smiled back.

"And there's Severus there, you see. I heard he intends to test the 'if looks could kill' theory, with his thousand yard glare. Should knock

'em dead, right?" Harry could practically feel the mood in the room lighten, while Snape pretended to be angry, scowling at the young couple by the window. "And look! He's even getting some rehearsal time in now!" The young Gryffindor smirked as Severus grumbled under his breath.

"And Padfoot too. He's coming along for comic relief. He and the Twins have been cooking something up, apparently. Though I don't think our enemies will be the ones laughing." Harry mused, and almost crowed with delight when he felt Hermione laugh. The others joined in, even Moody, who's loud hearty laugh put a few people off. Hermione snickered as she saw some of the others slowly edging away from the battle worn Auror. Harry ignored the rest of them, and looked down into his Hermione's eyes.

"I'm not saying it will be a walk in the park, but we have something 'the Dark Lord knows not'. We have our friends, our family, and our love. And I for one, mphmpph!" Harry was silenced from his little speech when Hermione put a hand either side of his head and yanked him forwards for a long deep kiss. Harry needed to learn when to shut up sometimes.

The rest of the family cheered while Harry just smiled, and focused his attentions on his wonderful girlfriend.

They jumped away from each other, at the sound of a loud bang. Everyone looked round to see one of the Twin's fireworks had gone off by mistake. Harry scowled at the interruption while the others laughed.

"Sorry Harry!" They both said at the same time. Before the lovebirds could recommence, Moody's growl cut them off.

"Enough funny business. Time to go!" He announced, and they marched as one, for the door.

They were following Neville, as he led the way through the forest, the darkness seeming not to bother the normally timid boy. Sirius was grumbling under his breath, about the cold and the scary foliage, but no one else was really making much noise.

The three Aurors were spread out on either side of the main party; Harry and Belle were in the centre. Harry had become more and more distant, as they approached the Manor, it was as if he was undergoing an inner preparation, and it was somewhat similar to the way he had behaved, the night they'd found Cadalbolg.

There was a chill in the air, and no one was sure if it was because of the encroaching winter night, or if it was the presence of the Dementors. Nobody particularly wanted to find out either. They moved as silently as they could, through the dark forest. The trees were tall and menacing, their branches leaning towards them, almost as if they wanted to reach out and snare them. It seemed as though they were only being held back by Neville's will.

When he had joined the family the night before, he had seemed afraid, and hesitant. He had quietly confessed to Theo that he was worried that the trust they all had in him was misplaced. He wasn't at all sure of his power, or if he would be able to help. Theo had reassured him, that he should relax and do what came naturally. The idea, with any kind of ability, was not to force it. It should be allowed to flow, and be its own master.

"Just be yourself Neville, and everything will be OK." Theo assured him. When they were preparing to leave, Theo winked at the shy young man, and was proud to see the look of sheer determination which lit the other boy's eyes. The two of them held each other's gazes as the portkeys whisked them away.

They passed the first line with little trouble, but all were glad of the young loremaster's presence. The Dark Lord's forces probably didn't consider the copse a weakness as it was heavily overgrown, and a normal person wouldn't have been able to pass through it.

"So far so good." Mumbled Fred and the others repressed the urge to groan. He was crouching behind some boulders with Moody, Kingsley, Harry and Sirius. The others were a little way behind them, keeping their eyes and ears open.

"That's just tempting fate laddie." Alastor growled quietly, and Harry snorted softly.

“Didn’t you realise Alastor? Everything that can go wrong, will go wrong. And everything happens to me!” Harry advised him quietly, having snapped out of his earlier distraction. The gnarled old Auror firmly tramped down the urge to laugh out loud.

“As interesting as this is gentlemen...” Shacklebolt prompted them.

“Right, now, the location of the control crystal. I figure, it has to be guarded. Only an idiot would leave it unsupervised, and while *he* might be stupid, not all his lackeys are.” Moody said softly.

“OK, split up then? Everyone got a cloak or something which doesn’t require a spell?” Harry asked and they all murmured an affirmative. “Let’s go then.” He ordered and one by one, they silently disappeared.

Hermione had charmed some walkie talkies to work close to magic, and tested them to see if they would trip the wards. In the end, they weren’t sure, but as other magical objects, like wands, didn’t trip most wards, they decided it was worth the risk. It wasn’t like Voldy would bother to key every single Deatheater’s wand into the wards – that would be a waste of time and effort. And also, radios would be less likely to cause a disturbance, than communication pendants and the like.

Harry spotted what must be the centre of the wards, being guarded by four cloaked figures. He wasn’t sure if they were normal Deatheaters, werewolves or what, but he stayed concealed, as he waited to see if there were any more. As quietly as possible, he circled the hut, trying to see inside.

It was too dark to see anything, so he decided they would just have to risk it, they didn’t have the time to hang about here all night. He moved back some distance, into the relative no-man’s land between the first and second lines of defence. He flicked a button on his radio, and was rewarded with the sound of static.

“Barracuda, this is Viper. Come in please, over.” He said, hunching behind some large shrubs for cover. He waited for a response from Moody, who the team had jokingly named Barracuda, since he was

such a fierce hunter of his prey. A moment later, there was another crackle and he could hear the aging Auror's gruff reply.

"Receiving you Viper. Report, over." He said and Harry looked cautiously all around before speaking into the device.

"Target located, four hostiles in evidence, over." Harry told him and then waited again.

"Give us your location, over." Harry smiled and told them where he was. He waited, nerves on edge, and adrenaline rushing while he kept on his guard. At the prearranged signal, the others joined him, and he showed them where the target was.

"OK, go ahead and neutralise them son." Alastor ordered, and Harry smirked.

"Thought you'd never ask." He replied and slowly changed. It was a risk, they knew, letting Harry transform, but Remus had explained it was a calculated risk. Since the transformation was directed inwards, very little magic should leak out to the surrounding area. They all watched, slightly apprehensive, as the young man disappeared, and the Asp Viper took his place. Snake-Harry tested the air with his tongue for a few moments, before slithering away.

The young Gryffindor had spent a lot of time with his Auntie Belle, learning about his Animagus form from her, as she had spent a much longer time as a snake than he. He knew now, how much toxin to use to bring about cardiac arrest, and how much to shock someone into unconsciousness. He didn't want to kill these men, but would if necessary. Snake-Harry had no problem with this, where his other form might have. After all, the snake knew what it meant to survive, and to protect one's nest and nest-mates.

In a short amount of time, three of the four guards were felled, but unfortunately one of them spotted him, and ran away, presumably to sound the alarm. Harry tried to go after him, but just wasn't fast enough.

“Fuck!” He hissed out in parseltongue. He kept after the man, wondering how to draw attention to the fleeing Deatheater. He was brought up short when the man suddenly fell before him, a gurgling noise coming from his prone body. He slithered forwards, and could taste the metallic tang of blood in the air. The guard had been felled by one of Alastor’s daggers, which had caught him in the throat. Without sparing the dead man a flick of his tail, Snake-Harry sped off in the grass, back to his companions.

Once he changed back into a man, he tried to calm his frayed nerves. That was a problem with the shifting of forms. Things which had no effect on him as the viper, certainly upset him as a man. He could still almost taste that man’s blood on his tongue. He repressed the feelings though, and drew calm from his bond with the sword. Cadalbolg was currently strapped to his back, in a leather harness, hidden by its own ancient magic.

Moody growled the order back to Tonks, to bring the others here, while the advance party moved forwards to secure the hut, and the centre of the wards. They made sure not to cross the visible line of magic, which indicated the beginning of the wards. When the rest of the group arrived, they took up defensive positions, while they watched Annabelle cautiously approach the unit containing the control crystal. Just before she entered the wards, she gulped and turned back to her husband.

“I love you.” She said quietly, before she took a decisive step forward and touched a finger to the lock. There was an audible hiss as everyone drew in a breath and waited. Belle spoke in a calm voice, as she felt a sharp prick to her finger.

“It’s ensuring that I am a descendant of Salazar Slytherin. It’s taken some blood and...there.” The lid lifted and the crystal was displayed. There was a soft sigh, as the rest of the family released the breath they’d been holding.

“Now, take a deep breath, and stay calm Belle. Remember what you need to do.” Severus instructed. Walking forwards to stand as close to her as he dared. She placed her hand over the controller, and closed her eyes.

Along minute later, and she opened them again. She let out an explosive breath and visibly sagged, stumbling a little. Severus forgot about the wards and practically leapt towards his wife, pulling her into his arms. The others surged forward him to stop him, but then stopped as they heard no alarm sound.

“She did it!” Exclaimed George.

“I’d say she did, brother.” Nodded Fred. The others exchanged relieved looks.

“Right then, onwards.” Ordered Moody, and they followed close behind him.

They made their way round to the back of the Manor, as Moody had indicated the night before, and had a few worrying close calls with patrols. They had to incapacitate a few Deatheaters, and were scared that someone was going to notice soon. The group paused, as the entrance Moody had shown them on the map came into view.

“Looks like it was a decorative walk of some kind. The plants here, have been twisted, and changed. They...long for freedom, release.” Neville murmured, as he walked towards the overgrown mess. More than a few of them cursed as they followed him, he seemed to be in some kind of trance. There was no way of stopping him however, and none wanted to risk disturbing him. So, they just kept on walking, hoping for the best, praying to the Gods that it would be alright.

After some time, and muffled swearing from those who got scratched by nasty vegetation, Neville stopped. He was silent, and there was a look of intense concentration on his face. The rest of the group glanced at each other, wondering what to do. They were so close, and tension was running high. Belle, who was still wrapped in her husband’s arms, squinted in the darkness at the young loremaster. She frowned and then whispered down the line of the raiding party.

“**Get Theo.**” She hissed to Harry, and he nodded, passing the order backwards, like a game of Chinese Whispers. The young Saviour only hoped the message wouldn’t get as garbled as it usually did in

that game, as amusing as it was, it really wouldn't help matters just now. It seemed to work however, as Theo silently made his way forwards and crouched down next to Severus and Belle.

"What's up with Neville?" He asked, and they both shrugged.

"His aura is going mad." Harry muttered and both Snapes raised their eyebrows. Really, Harry should be more forthcoming about his gifts. Since it was a rather inappropriate time for scolding, they just sighed.

"What does that mean?" Harry's brother asked, deciding to ignore the by-play between his Head of House and his Mrs.

"I don't know. Look, you're the one he trusts the most out of us lot, right? You have a rapport." Harry said, and the young Slytherin just shrugged.

"Suppose so." He mumbled, and Belle nodded.

"Right, well, try and approach him. If he trusts you, his magic should let you reach him unharmed." She suggested, and Theo blinked.

"Unharmed? You mean he's dangerous?" He demanded and she shook her head.

"He's in flux. It's possible his magic will act on instinct and lash out at any potential threat." Harry explained for her.

"Shouldn't we just wait this out then?" Theo hedged and this time Severus spoke up.

"I wish we could, but we don't have the time. We need to know how long this is going to take, or if he needs assistance." He said and Theo sighed in defeat.

"OK, OK. But if he kills me, you guys will be the first ones I haunt." He grumbled and the three of them laughed softly. Theo slowly rose to his feet, and inched his way towards the stationary Gryffindor.

"Why do I let myself get talked into these things? Oh yeah, 'cause I just had to go and get mixed up with a bunch of Gryffindorks. Sheesh." He thought to himself, as he got closer to his friend.

"OK Longbottom, here goes nothing." Theo silently prayed that the future herbologist really did trust him, and placed a tentative hand on his shoulder.

He gasped audibly, as a wave of magic hit him, and brought him to his knees, Neville along with him. The others quickly made their way towards the two boys, muttering questions.

"No, I'm OK, I just felt...drained...for a moment....I'm fine..." Theo panted, as he tried to get his breath back. "You...alright....Longbottom?" He asked, prodding him in the chest. Neville coughed a bit, and struggled to his knees.

"I'm...ah...I'll...be fine...just a second..." He wheezed, as he coughed again. A water bottle was passed down the line for each young man, and they both sipped gratefully.

"What happened?" Asked Sirius, who was fussing over Theo. For once, the quiet Slytherin didn't protest. He privately admitted that it was nice to have someone fuss over him for once. His parents had forced him to become independent, both practically and emotionally, and frankly, being around these emotionally charged Gryffindors was quite the experience. But he put such thoughts aside for the moment.

"Well, *he* put a spell on the plants...and their price, for their help...was for me to break it. It took....a lot...and..." He paused as he took another sip of water, willing his heart to slow down, and his breathing to get back to normal. He didn't even blink an eyelid, when Snape thrust a potion under his nose; he just downed it without a second thought. Closing his eyes, he felt the gradual return of his magic and energy. "Thanks." He mumbled, and received a grunt in reply. He looked over at Theo and saw his friend had been similarly supplied. "Sorry Theo." He said, looking away.

"What for?" Theo replied and Neville turned back to face him, frowning.

“For draining your magic, I felt the connection and didn’t think. I just took what I needed. It was an awful thing to do.” Neville said, and he could just about see Theo shrug in the darkness.

“Doesn’t matter. Did it get the job done?” He asked, and Neville spluttered.

“But...” He protested, but his least favourite teacher cut him off.

“Time is of the essence Longbottom, can we get in?” He demanded, in the mildest tone he could muster just then. Neville took a deep breath and released it slowly.

“See for yourself.” He replied, and waved a hand at the now clear path into the house, and the open door.

“Let’s go then.” Sirius said, leading the way forward with Moody and Shacklebolt, the rest not far behind.

“OK, according to our contact, he’ll be in the main audience chamber, which coincides with Pansy’s visions. That is two floors up from us. Now, stealth is the preferred method here, but if you have to silence someone, silence them. Any questions?” Moody growled in a low voice, and everyone shook their heads. Harry and Sirius winked at each other, before both transforming and leading the way. The rest brought out the various objects they’d brought to other make themselves invisible, or with notice me not charms on them. Casting would be very risky right then. With so many of them though, someone was bound to run into them sooner or later.

They made it to the next level, with a few minor altercations. Nothing the viper's venom couldn't handle. Snake-Harry slid noiselessly down the halls. He was out on point, while the others waited for his hiss of confirmation to keep moving. He paused as he saw an approaching Deatheater.

Lucius Malfoy.

Since when did he get out of Azkaban? And what was he doing so far from his Master’s feet? Shouldn’t he be kissing Voldemort’s robes, or

his arse? He waited to see which way Malfoy was going, and was almost disappointed when the man made a beeline for the main stairs. He was alone, and Harry's viper lamented the lost chance of biting him. Still, the human in him was pleased he hadn't got close enough, as he knew he wouldn't have held back, he would have killed him.

He slid back to Padfoot, and flicked his tail to indicate the coast was clear. They went up the backstairs, the servant's passages that people like Malfoy thought were beneath their dignity. Arrogance was often evil's undoing. No one had any problem exploiting such a weakness.

They ran into a problem, when they reached the second floor. Something was wedged against the door, and they could only open it a crack. Harry slithered through while Blaise held the stubborn door open for him.

They heard a hiss of surprise from Snake-Harry, and a moment later, and low retching sound. There was a noise, like something was being moved aside, and then Harry opened the door.

"Um, there's...bits....of people stored in here. I do not want to know what they are for. You might want to avert your eyes when you come through." Harry announced in a sick sounding voice.

"Probably McNair...he has some...unpleasant fetishes. Plus, the Dark Lord likes to..." Snape was cut off by Harry, who was almost retching again.

"Please, I don't want to know." He protested as he transformed again, moving out through the partially open door.

Harry knew when they were getting close, thanks to Cadalbolg. The sword was practically humming, as they neared the chamber which the demon was residing in. He silently wondered if it would be able to sense the weapon's presence. At this thought, the buzzing coming from the sword dimmed down, and Harry chuckled, a hissing laugh. He'd been worried at first, that he wouldn't be able to carry the sword, because he needed to change into his animagus form. But the magic

surrounding the sword made sure that it too transformed, when he turned into his viper. It'd tried to explain it, and frankly, he'd given up trying to understand after the third time.

There seemed to be some kind of party or revel going on, and the Deatheaters seemed a mite distracted. A small amount of pain made it through his scar, leading Harry to exactly where he needed to be. He was glad for once, that Voldy seemed to be feeling some intense emotions. His nerves were currently on a fine edge, and he did not want to draw this out any longer than it needed to be. He waited for the others to join them.

"As far as I remember, there's an antechamber, through there, rarely used." Belle said and Harry nodded, slithering off to investigate. Severus looked curiously at his wife, a question in his eyes.

"We lived here, for a time." Was all she was prepared to say. He nodded, and waited.

"Clear. There is a connecting door to the chamber. We can get in that way. I looked though the gap, and the door opens out under a balcony, it's fairly dark in the room, we should be able to get in unnoticed. It seems to be a revel for the upper tiers only. There aren't actually a lot of Deatheaters in there." Harry reported and Belled translated back to Snape and Moody. She waited for the brief discussion to conclude, and then turned back Harry.

"OK. The ones with invisibility cloaks will spread throughout the room, and we'll hit them at once, from all sides." Annabelle hissed back, and Snake-Harry hissed his assent. The group slowly filtered through the room, bunching up to all try and fit.

"Ready?" Asked Annabelle. Harry let out a soft hissing laugh.

"As I'll ever be."

A/N: Sorry for the cliff hanger, but it would just be too long otherwise. Next chapter should be out very soon. Until then, please review! Reviews inspire me to write...seriously...

Chapter Thirty – Where Comeuppance Isn't Just a Long Word

“I expect to pass through this world but once; any good thing therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now; let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.”

Ettiene De Grellet

The Deatheaters were rather rowdy as the group silently entered, each of them attempting to breathe slowly and quietly. Their nerves were strung tight, so many prayers and wishes running through the back of their minds as they tried to focus on the task at hand. The rabble was scattered around, and spirits were high. They all had drinks, and were in clusters of three or four, laughing and shouting.

In the middle of it all, sat Voldemort, smirking with contempt as he regarded his most faithful. He was idly stroking the head of his familiar, Nagini, who was curled up in his lap.

Snake-Harry tasted the air, and could not find the scent of the large Cobra. There was a coppery tang to the air, which indicated that blood had been spilled recently. He hoped that in all this ruckus, if he could not sense her, she would not be able to sense him. It wasn't too important, as they would be making their move very soon, but any time they could buy would be worth it. He paused as he neared Voldemort's throne. It was a monstrosity, made of what appeared to be human bone. He could feel the power coming from Cadalbolg, as he looked on the demon seated so casually in the centre of this celebration of evil. His tongue flicked as he considered the people gathered here.

They claimed to want to protect wizarding kind from the muggles, they thought themselves above them. But they failed to realise that they were vastly outnumbered when it came to the rest of the world. There were more than six and a half billion people on earth, and even that was only a rough estimation. And the vast majority of those

billions, were muggles. Well, it was time to remind these idiots that complacency is a deadly conceit.

He slithered towards the disgusting throne, not bothering to hide his presence. Nagini's eyes opened and regarded him steadily. He didn't flinch, nor did he back away from her gaze. She hissed at him, but it didn't translate into words. The viper part of him knew what she was saying though, and he hissed an affirmative. She paused for a moment, before gracefully sliding away. Harry was struck for a moment with surprise. He had not believed that she would abandon her master so easily. Perhaps she knew that she did not serve the real Tom? There was no way to tell. However, he did know that she was first, and foremost a snake. And animal with instincts, and just like ever creature on Earth, survival was one of the strongest. She had weighed and measured the situation, and acted for her own self preservation. His inner Slytherin admired her practical thinking. He shook himself mentally, and decided that he could ask her about it later, if there was a later.

He inched closer to Voldemort, until he was hidden in the shadows of the hideous construction. His head went under the demon's robes, until he found his ankle, then he struck, with as much force as he could, injecting huge amounts of his lethal venom. He was under no illusions it would kill the bastard, but it would incapacitate him for a few minutes.

Voldemort cried out as fire spread through his limbs, unknowingly signalling the force hidden in his halls to begin the attack. His followers turned towards his shout and stumbled about dumbly, the alcohol in their veins clouding their motor functions, along with whatever wits they had in the first place.

At that moment, the others threw off their various cloaks and invisibility items and fired the guns they had spent so many hours practicing with, under Severus' critical eye. The idea was to injure and not kill, but leave their opponents unable to fight, but if they had to kill, they would. Most of these gathered here would end up sentenced to the Dementor's Kiss, and in some way, death by

gunshot was a more compassionate way to die. None of the family felt comfortable with killing, however justified it might be, so they had learned the places to aim for which would take their opponents down quickly.

Not all of them had guns; Hermione was with Belle, still invisible, protecting both of them with a shield. The young Gryffindor had been touched when Professor Snape had asked her to protect his wife and their unborn child, and had spent many hours practicing and improving her focus. She promised the Professor she would conjure the strongest shield she could, and hold it steady over his love.

Harry waited, still concealed under the throne, Voldemort in no condition to search for his attacker. He waited while the others set about the task of taking out the Death Eaters. He was mildly shocked that none of them seemed to recognise the muggle firearms, or how to defend themselves against them. But then they were the worst kind of purebloods. Anything that they considered beneath them was ignored. This attitude was passed down through generations of their families, and it was ridiculously short sighted.

What some wizards failed to see, with their myopic view of the world, was that while wizard culture was fairly stagnant, muggles were not. They set about inventing and researching, always wanting to learn, to find out more about themselves, about the world. The muggle world never stood still, there were always reaching, off into the distance, to something no one else could see. Wizards needed shaking up, they needed to know that if they continued in their current attitudes and practices, the muggles would leave them behind. Muggles may not have magic in the way wizards did, but they had created a magic of their own: their imaginations.

He hissed as he heard a shout coming from the back of the room, near the main doors. It seemed that some Death Eaters weren't in the room with the rest, and were now trying to find a way in, and help their comrades. This was not something they had planned for.

Moody and Sirius were nearest the back, and they made a quick assessment of their current situation inside the audience chamber.

Only a few knots of Deathaters were left, and they seemed to have some modicum of intelligence, as they'd raised a shield which was stopping most of the bullets. They were still outnumbered though, and the others had pulled their wands to finish them off. Old Voldy was prostrated on his throne, still writhing in pain as the demon inside him used its magic to neutralise the poison Harry had injected him with. They looked at each other and made a quick decision.

"Sirius, Tonks, Kingsley, you three hold the door. It's fairly narrow, so if and when they come through, they should bottle neck, giving you time to take them out. Stay on guard. The rest of you, stunners at each knot of Deathaters, simultaneously, on my mark. Longbottom and Theodore, you keep firing as a distraction." Moody barked out these orders and the others rushed to obey.

Harry watched this impassively, confident they did not need his help. He could feel the Sword pressing on his mind, and he knew the time to act would be soon. He slithered to the back of the throne and into the space behind it. He transformed back into himself, and drew the Celestial Weapon. With one last look at the rabble in front of the throne, he could see his family and friends had things under control. Cadalbolg was singing in his ears, driving him to destroy the affront to Mother Nature before him. Without conscious thought, he raised the Sword high, and slashed the back off the monstrosity in front of him.

The demon howled out in pain as the essence of the Sword neared him, and struggled to move, hindered by the neurotoxin still swimming in his veins. Harry didn't move from behind Voldemort's throne, as he was unwilling to expose his back to the Deathaters. So, taking strength from the weapon, he kicked the back of it, sending it and Voldemort off the dais, and onto the blood stained stone floor.

The bones shattered into shards, spilling across the floor, some of them cutting the demon now sprawled in a heap on the ground. It must have successfully neutralised the poison in its stolen body however, as Voldemort quickly regained his strength and rose to his feet, red eyes blazing with rage.

"You dare to attack me here! Do you even know who you face?" He hissed, and Harry laughed. Walking forwards so he was visible in the torch light, he pushed back his hood and gazed down at his nemesis.

"Hello Tom. Well, actually, I shouldn't say that. You are not Tom. Hello Voldemort. Having a bad day?" He asked, in a deceptively mild tone, amusement clearly showing in his eyes.

"What? Potter!? How did you get in here?" The bastard demanded, outrage and indignation in his voice. Harry laughed again, and brought forth Cadalbolg in plain sight. The hiss coming from his opponent told him that the demon recognised the weapon, and was probably afraid.

"You'd be surprised, Mouldy Shorts. Mother Nature herself, is against you. Her Children let us in, so we could free them from you." He said, with an air of urbanity, mocking the demon in front of him. Cadalbolg sung to him once more, and he straightened, all his previous teasing and humour suddenly lost from his face. His emerald eyes blazed with the power running through his veins, as he tried and measured the creature before him. He was found wanting, a being of pure darkness. He prepared to deliver his judgement.

"Voldemort, you are the Abomination. You are a scourge on the Earth and her Children, and you must be purged." He declared. Moving so quickly that he was practically a blur, Harry sped forwards and thrust the sword into his chest. There was a howl of pain, and Harry screamed as the demon tried to enter his body and take control of it. But he was not touched with the darkness, the way Tom had been. The orphanage had drained the love and innocence of the boy Tom had been. But Harry was not him. He had love, from his family, from his friends. And from his Hermione. The demon could find no purchase in his soul. The words he needed formed themselves in his mind, and he spoke them in a strained voice, yet with an overtone of an ancient power.

"I abjure thee Creature of Darkness. Return to the Hell which spawned thee, and never again corrupt this world with thy foul presence. Begone, begone, BEGONE!"

The last word was a roar, and a wave of brilliant light washed through the room, cleansing everything it touched. All were judged, and those who were found wanting, were left. Those who were found worthy, were healed. Their wounds closed, and their magic was replenished. The only innocent who was not saved, was Tom himself. Unfortunately, it was too late for him.

Harry held on for dear life, as a wind whipped through the hall, and nearly pulled him from the Sword. He gripped it with all his strength, knowing he had to hold on. After what seemed like an eternity, the light and the wind were suddenly gone, and he sagged with relief. The Sword slid out of his hands, as Tom's body slumped to the ground. He sank to his knees next to the wounded man, and felt tears begin to well up in his eyes.

The last of the Deatheaters, seeing their Master struck down, quickly surrendered, the ones at the door, they too witnessing what had just occurred, quickly threw down their wands, hoping for mercy. They were rapidly bound and stunned, and hauled over to the other prisoners.

A circle of people gathered round the body of the fallen Dark Lord. Harry was pulled off his knees by his Hermione, and he pulled her to him, never wanting to let go. He kept an arm round her, as the group watched a sorrowful Belle and Severus kneel down next to Tom, just as Pansy had seen in her vision, all those months ago. Annabelle pushed her hood back, and gazed into the eyes of her Father. His breathing was quick and shallow, and his face had a deathly pallor. He did not have long. His eyes though, showed confusion and relief. He looked at Belle, and frowned slightly.

"L-L-Léonie?" He whispered, and tears began to stream down her face.

"No, Pater. It's Aiyana." She replied and Tom's frown narrowed a little. He coughed and blood spattered his lips.

"Yani? You're....a...alive?" He asked, incredulous. Annabelle felt the sorrow for what could have been, swarm in and take up residence in her heart.

“Yes, I’m here Pater. So is Severus.” She said, indicating her husband. Tom saw the flash of gold as her hand moved.

“You’re...married...?” He said, looking at them both.

“Yes we are Tom. We’re going to have a baby.” Severus told him, moving his wife’s cloak so her large pregnant belly was visible. Tom reached out a hand, and Belle shuffled closer so he could reach her. He placed his hand on her swollen abdomen, and gazed at it in awe and wonder.

“A...grandchild?” He whispered and coughed again. Belle leaned forward to try and help him, but there was nothing she could do. When it had passed, Tom smiled a weak smile at her, but it was a happy smile to.

“It’s okay, daughter. It’s time for me to...leave.” There was another pause before he spoke again. This time, his voice was so faint, the two of them had to strain to hear it. “Thank you. Goodbye.” Annabelle listened, feeling her Father’s breath against her face, and then suddenly, he was gone. She could not feel him breathing anymore, and his hand fell away from her belly.

“NOOOO! Pater, come back! Please! Come back!” She cried, sobbing hysterically and flinging herself on his now lifeless body.

“Annabelle! Annabelle, please!” Severus pulled her into his arms, worried at what her despair would do the baby. “Love, please, think about the baby, please, you must calm down. He is released, remember? He is with your Mother now. Please, please, you must...” He held her tight to him, as his grief for a man who was never truly allowed to live overcame him as well.

The group leaving the Manor was not feeling victorious, rather, they felt tired and sore, despite the healing. What had occurred here should never have been allowed to happen. The Wizarding World should never have let it get this far. If all of them had stood up as one and refused to be cowed, refused to live in fear and be terrorised, then Voldemort would not have been able to amass such power or such a following. But that was not the way of the world. But for a

precious few, people were ultimately selfish. As long as they were alright, they were happy to let other people worry about the state of the world or Dark Lords.

Before they left, as promised, Cadalbolg's owner came to collect the Sword.

They had reached the grounds, and already there was a noticeable difference in the surrounding area. The sun was just rising, and the early dawn light seemed to bring a promise of hope and healing. The Earth would renew itself once more, just as it always did. Life, was a cycle, and the ending of this particular stage, brought about the next.

As they were walking up the gravel path, their captives floating behind them, a gentle wave of feeling hit them, and they all fell to their knees. Seeming to melt out of the clouds, a figure surrounded in pulsating white light emerged, a smile on her face, and a sparkle in her emerald eyes. Next to her, with unmistakable messy black hair, was a figure whose face was as familiar to Harry as his own.

"Mum? Dad?" He asked, choked with emotion.

"Hello Son." His father replied, his voice echoing slightly, as if he was speaking from a vast distance.

"Wha...Hi! How are you? What are you doing here?" He replied. They both laughed at his rushed greeting and smiled proudly at him.

"We came for the Sword. It is to be returned to Gaia. She will send it, if it is needed again. She allowed us to come to you, so we could see you and tell you how proud we are of you." James explained, he and Lily beamed at their son. Wordlessly, his Mum summoned the sword from where it was still lodged in Tom's body.

"That's right. We don't have much time, but we wanted to tell you, we love you Harry. We love you very much." She said, and he felt bittersweet tears collecting at the corners of his eyes. He was grateful for this chance, but it brought grief with it as well. Though, the pain which had always been there, when he thought of his parents, had

somehow lessened. He looked up to see his Dad had turned to face his old friend.

"You too, Padfoot. Thank you for looking after him, and loving him. Tell Moony thanks as well, and congratulations on the little nipper. I'm glad you finally got your act together and made an honest man out of him." James said, a teasing light in his eyes. He exchanged a look with his wife, and then turned to Severus. "Snape...Severus. I am more sorry than words can say. I am glad to see that you have not let the actions of a petty, vindictive child ruin your life. You are a better man than me. Congratulations to you as well. And now we must go." He declared, and took his wife's hand.

"The world will right itself, Gaia has not abandoned her children. Go, and rest. I think you have earned it." Lily said, and with one last smile and wave, the two of them vanished.

The next few hours were a blur for Harry. He was unsure how they got back to Hogwarts. He didn't remember if they Disapparated or used a portkey. His nerves had been so highly strung for the last few months, that now it was over, it was like his brain had gone on holiday. Hermione was there though, and she seemed to be handling things for him. She was his rock, his constant, and he trusted her to take care of him, when he was so obviously overwhelmed. When he finally came to, he found was sat on a bed in the Hospital Wing, and there seemed to be an argument of sorts going on by the entrance. Sirius was sitting in a chair next to his bed, and he could see Belle lying in the next bed down, Snape at her side, like a silent sentinel.

"What's going on?" He asked quietly, and Sirius jumped.

"Harry! Don't do that to me." He protested, a hand pressed against his chest. Harry snickered and patted him on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry Dad. But what's all the commotion about?" He winced as he heard Hermione shrieking at someone about him needing his rest.

"Nice set of lungs she has, that girlfriend of yours." Sirius said with a smirk. Harry raised his eyebrows at him, and his Father chuckled. "Well, anyway. Fudge the Fuckwit is here. He wants to arrest you for

the murder of Tom Marvolo Riddle.” He said, in a less than amused voice.

“What the? Does that man have nothing better to do with his time? First, I’m the bloody “Saviour”, then I’m a "attention seeking raving lunatic", unstable and spouting off lies about Voldemort returning. Then I’m the next Dark Lord, and now I’m a murderer for offing the bastard that no one else could! Where does he get off? You know what? Bollocks to this. Get Rita Skeeter in here now!”. Harry declared, and Sirius smirked.

“As you command, my Lord.” He replied, with a jaunty salute. He got up to go and speak to the group crowded round the door, and Harry sighed, leaning back in his bed.

“You know Harry, you would have done well, in Slytherin. But, alas, you are ever the reckless, headstrong young Lion. If you tell anyone about this, I’ll kill you. But still, job well done. Fifty points to Gryffindor. ” Harry turned to his Auntie Belle’s husband in disbelief, and then seeing the look of fond exasperation, he smirked. He put his hands behind his head and rested his eyes.

“Today has been a good day.” He decided, and fell asleep.

Chapter Thirty One – In Which A Summons is Received

“Envy is the ulcer of the soul.”

Socrates (469 BC - 399 BC)

“Order! Order! I call this convention of the Wizengamot to order!” Dumbledore raised his voice to get the attention of the crowd gathered in Court Room Ten, at the Ministry of Magic for the upcoming and frankly, extremely high profile trial. Anything to do with the Boy-Who-Lived-Again was high profile. The people in the galleries were in uproar over the proceedings which were about to begin, and the old man was finding it hard to keep them under control.

The Wizarding World had been celebrating non-stop since Harry Potter and his cohorts had defeated Voldemort with so very little loss of life. Harry privately wondered if some were disappointed that there had not been an epic pitched battle on the grounds of Hogwarts, with himself making a valiant last stand against the forces of the dark, saving them all in a grand duel against the Dark Lord. There seemed to be a definite sense of “Huh?” to most people’s reactions to the news, and he also speculated to himself that perhaps there was money to be made in a wizarding soap opera, or something of that kind.

Most of the Death eaters were being held captive, and only a few of them remained at large. It was early days, but even they seemed to be keeping their heads down. Lucius Malfoy was one of them, unfortunately, and had been greasing palms frantically, to try and stay out of prison.

One of those palms had to have been Minister Fudge’s, because when Harry and the others had been thoroughly debriefed by Amelia Bones and other members of the Department for Magical Law Enforcement, his name had come up as someone Harry had seen at Riddle Manor. Since then, Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, had been calling for Harry’s arrest for vigilante actions, treason and murder. His requests had fallen on deaf ears, however, for he had no friends among the Aurors, and Amelia thought he was delusional.

Harry himself, was rather unfazed by the whole thing. He'd been through so much in his short life, especially this last year, that Fudge and his petty attempts at revenge left him largely unaffected.

Since answering questions at the Ministry, everyone at Hogwarts had been given a week off. Having demonstrated they were more than capable of taking care of themselves, Harry and Hermione had taken themselves off to parts unknown, to get 'reacquainted' with each other. Nobody in the family had any doubts about what they would really be up to, but decided to hold off on the teasing until they returned home.

When Harry had been released from the hospital wing, Hermione had descended on him in a whirlwind of jumbled emotions. He managed to glean that she was proud of him, happy, joyous, scared, relieved and exhausted. Needless to say, it took him a while, and the judicious application of *a lot* of TLC to get her to calm down. The first day of the impromptu holiday, the two of them were whisked away to a surprise location, arranged by a twinkling Dumbledore.

"Whoa! I am never going to like those things." Harry said to Hermione as he landed badly and scowled, traveling by portkey still made him feel a bit nauseous. Hermione just laughed and looked away. While Harry was getting his stomach under control and retrieving their bags, he heard a sharp gasp come from his girlfriend, and looked up in alarm, his wand drawn in a matter of seconds. "What's the matter?" His said, darting furtive looks here and there for any sign of trouble. Hermione saw him brandishing his wand and *tsked* him.

"Oh, put that away silly, and look! Look where we are!" She declared waving an arm round indicating their surroundings. Harry took in their immediate area with a quick glance, and the first thing that popped up on his radar was the very large bed. He grinned suddenly, and looked at his girlfriend. She was walking round, examining things, and muttering about unpacking. Deciding that actions truly did speak louder than words, Harry tapped her on the shoulder and waited. She whirled round and jumped, seeing him standing so close behind, and gasped at the serious, intense look on his face.

Slowly, he reached out a hand and brushed her fringe out of her eyes. Hermione was surprised at the abrupt jump in her heart rate, and tried to take deep breaths. All of that was forgotten as Harry reached out for her again. He kissed her, open mouthed and full of passion, and then just as she was thinking about suggesting they move to the bed, he abruptly pulled away.

"Hermione, I..." His voice trailed off, and he trembled with the emotions he'd been repressing for so long. Hermione sensed his turmoil and stepped forward.

"Harry..." She began, but he held up a hand to silence her.

"No, let me speak. I must say this now, or I probably never will." Looking down at his shoes, he began to speak in a voice so low, that she had to strain to hear the words. "I'm sorry Hermione. Sorry for keeping you at a distance, for not sharing myself with you completely. I was scared, scared of so many things. I never really let myself feel. Oh, I wasn't lying when I told you how I felt about you, but I kept it locked away. Separated myself from it, internally. I..." He faltered for a second, and then lifted his head to look into her eyes.

Hermione gasped as she saw the storm of feelings expressed in those striking green eyes, and was shocked to see a single tear escape and slide down his cheek. She lifted a hand to wipe it away, and he leaned into her touch, moaning softly.

"I understand, Harry. I do, really. I won't say it didn't hurt, because it did. But it's in the past now. And you have the rest of our lives to make it up to me. Okay?" Hermione offered with a sweet smile, full of compassion and love. Harry smiled too, wider than she'd ever seen before. He took the hand that was still resting on his cheek, and pressed a kiss to the back of it. Then, his eyes not leaving hers, he turned it over, and pressed a lingering kiss into the palm.

"Okay, Hermione." He accepted, and after a brief pause, they both laughed.

Sirius' reunion with his husband was rather...memorable, as well. Remus had been left at the castle during the operation, owing to his

considerable girth and mercurial moods. Belle would have been left behind as well, but Pansy's vision showed that she had to be there, despite the Potions Master's wishes to the contrary.

As soon as they had trooped wearily into their rooms, Sirius had been assaulted by a whirlwind of robes and hormones which normally answered to the name Remus Black. The werewolf had clung to his mate, sobbing and slapping him at the same time, and refused to let go for the rest of the night and most of the next days as well.

Some of the family had been surprised by the quiet man's actions, but Severus explained that the wolf was in control at the moment, and wanted to reassure itself as to the safety and health of its mate, and that he was still an able protector for himself and his young. Sirius didn't seem to mind at all, and was vastly enjoying all the extra attention. They had got back together and married so quickly, that he had still been harbouring some lingering doubts as to his partner's feelings. Clearly, he had been worrying about nothing, and so spent most of his time fussing over his husband and pampering him unashamedly.

All in all, one could say things were looking up for the odd, now rather large family.

Until they heard about the trial, that is.

Harry and Hermione had returned a few hours earlier from their holiday, and both were practically glowing with happiness. They had plonked themselves down on the sofas in front of the fire, and had immediately begun dishing out presents and souvenirs, accepting refreshments from Dobby and answering all the rapid fire questions from their family and friends. Soon they got down to the nudging and winking stage, and, just as the various family members were about to whisk each of them off (the men with Harry and the women plus Remus with Hermione), a group of officious looking owls swooped in through the open window and stopped in front of several people.

"Er, did someone run a red light?" Asked Belle, and everyone exchanged nervous titters. Though, if questioned, most of the

gentlemen would deny doing anything as girly as 'tittering', to the grave. This looked sort of serious, and none of them were sure they could take anymore stress right then, despite all the parties and celebrations, they were still feeling fairly high strung, and it was going to take time for them to settle down.

No one moved.

The owls looked bored and impatient.

Again, everyone looked around. Clearly, nobody wanted to be the first one to open their letter and deal with whatever potential bad news was contained within.

The owls hooted indignantly, holding out their legs.

Sirius coughed and everyone turned to look at him. He blushed and shuffled his feet, frowning at the stuffy looking bird in front of him, not liking the feeling of all those eyes on him.

There was another long pause, then, "Oh for pity's sake! It's just an owl! It's not going to blow you up or anything!" Severus declared, and the rest chuckled.

Harry noticed that despite his outburst, his pseudo-uncle made no move to claim his message, and sighed. Muttering "*Why me?*", he stepped forward, slowly taking his letter from the bird, and unrolled it. He scanned it quickly, the others watching him closely. They weren't sure whether to be relived or suspicious, when a slow, satisfied smirk blossomed onto his face. He folded it carefully and put it into the inside pocket of the jacket he still hadn't taken off from earlier. Looking up, he saw the others watching him expectantly.

"It's a subpoena." He declared, crossing his arms and bouncing on the balls of his feet with barely repressed glee.

"And this is a good thing..." Draco suggested warily. Harry's smirked widened until an evil grin lit up his features.

"Oh, yes." He replied, raising his eyebrows suggestively. There was another pause, and then almost simultaneously, the others surged

forward to grab the letters addressed to them from the group of owls who were hooting sullenly at being ignored for so long. It was a matter of seconds while the summons were read and passed round the room, and then everyone was smirking evilly along with the boy-wonder.

It started with a poorly repressed snort, which came from Theo's direction, and was followed by an answering snicker from Neville. Soon, the others gave up the pretense of self control, and the room was full of the sound of raucous laughter as the extended family celebrated this further good news with abandon.

Harry stood off to one side, content for the moment to watch everyone while they looked so happy. Chuckling to himself as he watched Sirius summon Dobby and order drinks all round, he pulled the document from his robes and read it once more, inordinately pleased with the request it contained. For once in his life, he would be happy to oblige the Ministry.

From: Gerald Fusty, clerk of the court, on behalf of Madame Amelia Bones, Head of the Department for Magical Law Enforcement, representative of the Wizengamot.

To: Harry James Potter.

You are hereby commanded to report in person to the clerk of this court on the 4th May 1998, in the antechamber of Court Room Ten, at the Ministry of Magic in London.

You will be required to provide oral evidence in the case of the Wizarding People versus Cornelius Fudge and Dolores Umbridge for High Treason and Crimes against the public.

Please present yourself two hours before the trial is to commence and please leave any charmed items you do not wish to lose at home, as these may interfere with the instruments used in the Court Room. Aurors will scan your person for any controlling devices and/or charms, please advise us in advance of any medical reasons why these scans cannot be performed so alternatives can be arranged.

The Ministry of Magic thanks you in advance for your co-operation.

Chapter Thirty Two - Where a Trial is Underway

“Crime does not pay ... as well as politics.”

Alfred E. Newman

“I repeat! Order in the galleries, or you shall be silenced!” There was a pause as the spectators decided it really was in their best interests to listen to Dumbledore, or risk being thrown out and missing all the action. An Auror made his way over to the Head of the Wizengamot and whispered briefly. After receiving a nod in reply, the Auror made his way back towards the doors he had entered through.

“Thank you for your cooperation. The Wizengamot recognises the selection of Gawain Robards by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement as its prosecutor, as submitted by Amelia Bones, prior to the commencement of these proceedings. Mr Robards, please begin when you are ready.” Dumbledore nodded to a red robed Auror who was seated at the front, past the barrier separating the court from the crowds of public spectators.

Most of Harry’s family was not present at this time, because they were sequestered away in the room with the other witnesses, waiting to be called to give their testimonies. Some of them were not to be called however, and so it was that Pansy, Theo, Blaise, Neville, Remus, and Hermione were all sat in the gallery together, slightly separated from the rest of the public by a bodyguard of Aurors. Apparently, Madam Bones was worried they might be harassed, and so she took it upon herself to make sure they were guarded. Particularly when she found out about the werewolf’s pregnancy. She was so pleased by the sight of Remus’ impending fatherhood, that she had spent rather a long time fussing over him, and nearly drove him mad.

But all was well in the end, and now they were here, and vastly looking forward to watching Fudge get his. And the toad too - it would not do to forget about the Umbitch. Robards rose to his feet and

sketched a bow towards the assembled members of the Wizengamot, and then turned to face a set of double doors to his left.

“Bring out the defendants!” He ordered and a hush of anticipation fell over the room.

Fudge did not look happy.

His expression was a mixture of defiance and pompous arrogance. It looked as though he was *not* taking the whole thing seriously, or, if he was, he believed he would be vindicated. Umbridge did not look much better either. Though she had a hint of madness in her eyes, which was rather disturbing. In fact if anyone knew enough of both to make a comparison, they would find the glint in her beady eyes strangely reminiscent of Bellatrix Lestrange. A sight not at all encouraging. But she was here too, in court, and would get hers, just the same as Fudge. Veritaserum had already been approved for the trial, and they could not escape the truth.

Not this time.

“Before the people call their first witness, we would like to pose a question to the court. May I proceed?” Robards ordered, and the crowd exchange speculative glances, wondering what was afoot here. Albus merely raised one eyebrow and nodded for him to go ahead. Robards faced the Wizengamot, and began speaking.

“You already have a detailed listing of the charges of corruption, extortion, blackmail and embezzlement that have been perpetrated by the defendants. They are numerous and lengthy. The prosecution would like to focus solely on the charges of treason, attempted murder and endangerment of the people. As these carry life sentences or a Dementor’s Kiss, we believe that, if found guilty, these punishments would be sufficient to meet the other offences. Any monetary reparations, if necessary could be arranged by the court, once the case is concluded. What say you?” Robards was clearly not interested in wasting any time. There was a brief conference among the assembled witches and wizards who would be standing in judgement, before they turned their attention back to Robards.

“Does the opposing counsel agree?” Albus asked. There was a pause before the slimy looking man seated across from Gawain rose and nodded.

“Most assuredly, your honour.” He said with a sickeningly sycophantic smile. Dumbledore looked faintly disgusted, before waving a hand.

“Agreed Mr Robards. Proceed, if you will.” He said, and the Auror smiled.

“The People call Minerva McGonagall to the stand!” Robards ordered, and a murmur of whispered comments swept through the crowd. After a minimum of fuss, McGonagall was seated, and Robards turned to look at the members of the court.

“It is my intention here to establish the major faults in the former Minister’s handling of the First War against Voldemort, before covering more recent events.” He explained, and he was met with nods.

“Very well, you may begin.” Was the answer he received. Robards nodded and smiled at McGonagall.

“For the record, please state your name and profession.” He began.

“Minerva McGonagall, Professor of Transfiguration and Deputy Headmistress at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.” Minerva replied with her usual clipped tones.

“Thank you. Now, I would like to ask you about the events on the night of October 31st, 1981. What can you tell me of that night?” Gawain asked, and McGonagall frowned.

“Not very much. I remember a lot of panic, alarms going off and the like. Then Albus asked me to go and keep watch at young Mr Potter’s muggle relative’s house. When I asked why, he told me, about Lily and James Potter.” She said, her expression slightly pained.

“I see. And why did he want you to observe Mr Potter’s relatives?” Was the next question

"To see if they would be suitable guardians for the child." She replied.

"And did you believe they were?" Robards asked.

"No I did not."

"Did not Mr and Mrs Potter's will name any suitable guardians?" He said with a frown.

"Yes it did, but these were disregarded." Robards asked her to explain. "Not long after the news of the deaths had reached us, Minister Fudge arrived at the school, and demanded custody of the child." A gasp went up from the crowd, and was silenced by a quelling glare from Dumbledore.

"Please continue Minerva." He instructed in a subdued voice, slightly lost in his memories.

"Yes Headmaster. As I was saying, the Minister arrived and demanded Harry be made a ward of the Ministry, and under his protection. Albus objected, mentioning the Potters' will, and that there would be instructions contained within on whom should have the care of young Mr Potter. The Minister then attempted to incinerate the document, but was stopped by the charms Lily Potter had placed on it. He snatched it from the Headmaster and said as Minister of Magic, he was declaring it void. After a very long argument, Albus managed a compromise with Mr Fudge, and Harry was sent to live with the Dursleys." She recounted.

"And was this ever made official? Robards questioned.

"I do not believe so. At least, not magically." The Potter's will still existed at that time, I do not know if it does now, and as such, no magical contracts could be made to contradict it. I believe the guardianship for Petunia Dursley was made legal in the muggle world, not ours." McGonagall informed them.

"Thank you, Professor. Now, do you know who was listed as the first choice for guardianship of Harry Potter?" He asked and she nodded.

“Sirius Black was to be the first choice. If he was unavailable, then Andromeda and Ted Tonks were to raise him. Amelia Bones was the next on the list. Remus Lupin was to be their choice if Sirius was incapacitated, but they knew the law would never allow it.” She explained.

“Right. Because he is a werewolf, as I understand. OK, onto the issue of the Secret Keeper. It was understood until the arrest and execution of Peter Pettigrew that Sirius Black was the Secret Keeper of the Potters. As far as you knew at the time, was this was true?” He moved on, and McGonagall nodded again.

“The truth was only known to Sirius, Lily, James and Peter. Of course, eventually, Voldemort, knew the truth as well. We all believed it to be Sirius, as he was their closest friend. That is why we were so shocked when we found out they had been betrayed.” She paused, but Robards made a go on gesture with his hands. She sighed, and then continued. “When we discovered what we believed had happened, Sirius had already gone after Peter.” She said, a little sadly.

“And then he supposedly murdered Pettigrew and blew up the street. Tell me, do you know what occurred after Black’s arrest?” He asked, and she nodded once more.

“I was with the Headmaster when the Minister called him through the Floo, to advise him of the arrest.” She replied and there was a murmur from the crowd.

“Please tell us what you can remember of what was said.” Gawain requested and she took a deep breath.

“He said, ‘we’ve caught the bastard Dumbledore!’, and then went on to say of how he would be sending Black to Azkaban as soon as possible. The Headmaster protested vehemently, but Mr Fudge threatened to have Black kissed instead. Albus knew there was no way he would be able to get to Black in time to stop that from happening and so admitted defeat.” She stopped there and turned to look her long time friend and colleague in the eye. “I know he had doubts about Black’s guilt and wanted the chance to try him properly, but was never given that chance, Every time he tried to set up an

appeal, he was blocked and threatened by the Minister.” This time there were even more gasps from the crowd, but they were quickly silenced by another glare.

“Thank you Ms McGonagall, no more questions at this time.” Robards said with a smile. The oily man on his right stood.

“No questions, your honours.” He said, and sat down again. Dumbledore frowned at him, wondering why he didn’t want to cross examine the witness, but shrugged.

“You may step down.” He said to Minerva, and then turned back to Robards.

“The People call Sirius Black.”

“Mr Black, if you could recount to us, in your own words, what occurred on the night of your initial arrest, on 1st November, 1981 please.” Clearly Robards was only looking for certain key events. The members of the Wizengamot had each been provided with their own copies of a dossier which compiled a detailed account, with evidence, of each crimes the Department of Magical Law Enforcement had uncovered. As he had stated earlier, this trial was more geared towards the high profile crimes, rather than being a laundry list of everything the two of them had done wrong. They would’ve been there all year if that had been the case.

Sirius went over his maltreatment and the abuse he had suffered at the hands of Fudge’s lackeys, all of which were no longer employed at the Ministry, thank Merlin. He also described how the former minister had laughed in his face when he asked about a trial. What had been suspected before, but was now confirmed, was that no one had even taken a statement from Sirius. He had simply been thrown into a cell at the Ministry and then shipped off to Azkaban on the first available boat.

A *lot* of people were extremely unimpressed with that, and Dumbledore had to call for order again before they would stop chattering.

Since he had Sirius there on the stand, Robards decided to move right along, and so questioned him about the night he and Harry had been attacked by the Dementors.

“...The order had been given to ‘Kiss on sight’.” Sirius was saying, and Robards was frowning.

“I see, so, if detained, you were not to be questioned? Not even to find out how you escaped, and thus, eliminating a potential weakness in the prison’s defences?” He said, and though it was largely rhetorical, Sirius nodded. Gawain was looking at the members of the Wizengamot who were frowning and shaking their heads at this news.

“Pettigrew had escaped, Remus Lupin had transformed without his Wolfsbane, and I had been trying to draw him away from the children and Professor Snape. I and my then godson were swarmed by Dementors who tried to Kiss both of us.” He said, his face suddenly pale with the remembrance of that terrible night. There was a gasp from the crowd.

“They tried to Kiss an innocent boy? Mr Potter was what? Thirteen then?” Gawain was aghast, though he had heard all of this already. He paused for a moment. “It should be noted for the record that though he was called Mr Potter at the time, the young man of whom we speak is now Mr Black, having been adopted just under one year ago.” He said to the clerk, who signalled that he had made a note of it, and motioned for them to continue.

“As a former Auror, Mr Black, and as someone who worked closely with chasing down known criminals, could you give us your opinion on the methods used to recapture you after your escape from prison?” The prosecutor asked, and many of the spectators and judges looked on interestedly.

“While I appreciate that I was wanted criminal at the time, I believe the operation was faulty. Deploying such creatures on the grounds of a school, where hundreds of children go about their daily lives, was incredibly dangerous. Let alone the fact that they did not succeed in capturing me, it was, in fact, the Potions Master who managed that.” He stopped for a second and smiled, before continuing. “They actually tried to attack my godson - now son - before, during a

Quidditch match and caused him to fall off his broom. He has a very strong reaction to them, given the horrors in his past, being a witness to his own parents' murder." Sirius said, and his eyes were filled with great sadness. Indeed there were sounds of sniffing coming from the public benches and Sirius nodded to them in acknowledgement.

"A terrible tragedy." Robards intoned seriously. "With regards to the attack, I understand the Headmaster demanded that the Dementors be removed from the vicinity of the school, and the Minister refused, despite the evidence to show that it was too dangerous for the children?" Robards pressed.

"That's right. Albus tried his best, but Fudge wouldn't listen. It was just like when he had Hagrid arrested in Harry's first year and sent to Azkaban for *supposedly* opening the Chamber of Secrets. There was absolutely no evidence that Rubeus had anything to do with it, and the old man vouched for him too, but Fudge always does what Fudge wants and screw the rest of the world!" Sirius was a little agitated by this point, and seemed to have forgotten where he was and with whom. When he saw Dumbledore smiling at being called 'the old man', he stuttered an apology, looking a little sheepish. Robards looked rather amused, and turned back to the judges.

"I have no more questions." He advised them, and received a nod in reply.

"Mr Devcote?" Albus asked, looking at Fudge and Umbridge's defender, who had been strangely quiet.

"Um...no. No questions." He said, flicking through his papers and pointedly ignoring the angry looks being directed his way by his clients. Truth be told, the two defendants had found it extremely difficult to find anyone willing to take on their case, and had steadfastly refused legal aid from the courts. This...*lizard*, had been the only lawyer who agreed to help. Not that he was doing much. The two of them were beginning to have severe doubts as to his credentials. But it was too late for that now.

"Thank you Mr Black, you may step down." Advised Dumbledore, and Sirius moved off towards the group of friends and family in the galleries. The prosecutor was on his feet again, ready to call his next

witness. He paused for a moment, a calculating expression passing across his face briefly, before seeming to coming to a decision.

“The People call Harry Black, formerly Harry Potter!”

Cheers and applause erupted in the galleries at the announcement of the next witness, and Dumbledore took his time about silencing them, as he was too busy clapping and smiling proudly at Harry. A jab in his side from Amelia, who was also grinning, brought his attention back to the task at hand.

“*Ahem...*Yes, well. Order! Order! SILENCE!” He yelled when his polite calls didn’t really make much difference. He banged his hammer down onto the gavel a few times, and eventually the room quietened down. Harry was sat in the witness box, blushing and smiling sheepishly. He repressed the urge to wave at his family and friends in the gallery, and tried to adopt a serious expression. He failed miserably.

“Welcome Mr Black. Now, as with the others, we really only wish to go over some key events with you. If more detail is required later, we would ask that you make yourself available to the court for this. Is that acceptable?” Robards asked, and Harry nodded.

“Absolutely.” He confirmed, and the Auror smiled.

“Thank you. Now, with regards to the former Minister, Cornelius Fudge, could you confirm to us, in your own words, the events that occurred in the Hospital Wing, on the night of the Third Task of the Triwizard Tournament, at Hogwarts.” He asked and Harry swallowed. He *really* did not like thinking about that night. Taking a deep breath, he began his tale.

Of how he had been unconscious and woken in the Hospital Wing, to find Dumbledore and Fudge arguing and how the Minister refused to hear a single word of what he had to say, much less take a testimony under Veritaserum. How he wouldn't listen to any of it - The Dark Lord Voldemort arisen, the faces of the followers he had seen there - none of it.

This admission shook the people gathered in the Court Room. If Fudge had taken Harry seriously that night, they could have begun preparing much sooner, and possibly have stopped Voldemort before he got too powerful. So many people need not have died.

So many people...mothers, fathers, siblings, children, friends, lovers...it was a chilling thought.

After that, the rest of the proceedings seemed to be not so important.

They heard about the slander, the Blood Quill used by Umbridge, the Dementors she sent, at Fudge's order, to kill him. That farce of a trial, everything. The list went on and on. Eventually Harry was allowed to step down, and even Mr Devcote seemed to have given up. Not that he was doing very much to begin with.

They had gone over it all again anyway though. Every little thing that had been done wrong, every little thing which had perpetuated not only the suffering of Harry himself, but all the people around him.

By the end of it, Harry felt drained. He was exhausted, physically and emotionally. Despite knowing that it was necessary, he felt terribly exposed. Each piece of his life was being held up before a room full of people and torn apart. He'd known beforehand that that was what they were going to do, but still. Knowing about it, and it actually happening were two very different things.

The Wizengamot called a halt to the proceedings before the other witnesses could be called; it seemed they believed they already had enough evidence to make their decision. Nevertheless, everyone was sent out of the room while they began their deliberations. Harry was united with the rest of his family in the hallway, and was eternally grateful that they hid him from the press practically forming a human shield around him and Belle, while Hermione comforted him.

"Are you OK?" She asked, and he shook his head. Bringing up all that – what Fudge had done to him, and Umbridge, his summers with the Dursleys - it brought all the pain with it. And he felt it all anew. He wanted nothing more than for this to be over, so he could just get on

and live his life. Whatever it turned out to be, he just wanted to get on with it. He held Hermione close, and buried his face in her neck, seriously considering not resurfacing until they were out of here. His girlfriend rubbed soothing circles on his back, and dropped gentle kisses into his hair. Throughout all this, he tried his best to block out the dull roar of the shouts coming from the supporters who were trying to reach him, to no avail.

Before too long, it all got too much, and Sirius rather lost his temper. His nerves, never really that stable in the first place, were rather strained, what with everything. And these jackals were not only stressing him and Harry, but also his pregnant husband and sister.

“Ladies and Gentlemen! Please! Give us some space, we have pregnant people here!” He yelled, some Aurors spotting the chaos and marching over to help restore order.

“Now, at the moment, neither I, Mr Harry Black, nor any of the rest of us has any comment, however...” The howls of protest rose, but stopped abruptly at his murderous glare. “As I was saying, however, waiting around here won’t do you any good, as we have already given exclusive interview rights to Ms Skeeter, who will be publishing our story in The Quibbler.” It didn’t hurt to help a friend get ahead in the world, and Mr Lovegood was a likeable fellow. Plus, this was the best way to deal with Rita, she would only have made it all up if they had ignored her. This time they had her solemn vow to tell the truth, or she would forfeit rights to any future stories. The groans of chagrin from the rest of the media sharks in the hallways went on for quite some time, but the family ignored them as the Law Enforcement officers herded the whole crowd of them outside.

“Thank fuck for that!” Harry declared loudly, when they were all gone, and then a look of confusion crossed his face, before he promptly passed out.

Chapter Thirty Three - Where We Have an Epilogue

“Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow.
Don't walk behind me, I may not lead.
Just walk beside me and be my friend.”

Albert Camus (1913 – 1960)

Harry awoke to the low murmur of voices, and opened his bleary eyes.

White.

He was surrounded by white. He didn't think he was dead, so he assumed he must be in the Hospital Wing, *again!* Or perhaps it was St. Mungo's? He really wasn't sure. The last thing he could remember was passing out at the Ministry.

Oh Merlin! He had to just go and faint like a bloody girl. Stupid trial. Stupid Minister. Stupid everything!

“Awake are we? Well! We'll just see about that young man! I don't know what makes you think you can keep gallivanting off round the world with no concern for your health! Why I...” And at this point, Harry tuned out the rest of Madame Pomfrey's tirade.

He could read between the lines quite well. She had been worried, and she didn't really know how to express it. Her nerves had been frayed of late, and she needed to offload. Harry really didn't mind being the receptacle of this emotional catharsis, since she'd done it so often for him.

He waited until she had finished, and then offered up what he hoped was a suitably chastened and repentant smile. She smiled back, and he knew he was forgiven.

“Thanks for your help Madame Pomfrey. Do we know what caused me to blackout?” He asked, and she frowned.

"There were no toxins in your bloods stream, and no stray curses had affected you. Honestly? I think it might just have been stress. It's been known to happen." She explained, and he nodded.

"That is highly probable. Is Hermione here? What about my Fathers?" He asked and she rolled her eyes.

"Yes, they're waiting just outside. I suppose you want to me to let them in?" Harry gave her his best puppy-dog eyes and she caved, just like he knew she would. "Very well, but ten minutes only! And no getting up!" She ordered and then disappeared out of the double doors. There was a rumble of chaos, and then Harry was assaulted by a whirlwind of concerned girlfriend, which answered to the name of 'Hermione'.

"Oh, I was so *worried*! Are you OK now? Do you feel dizzy? Any headaches? Nausea? Do you see spots in front of your eyes?" She kissed him soundly before running her hands all over him to reassure herself that he was OK. He protested weakly, but she just flung herself at him and sobbed into his chest. He looked up from her and saw his family looking on with indulgent smiles on their faces, happy to see that he was awake and alright.

"So, what happened since I passed out? Have they got round to sentencing?" He asked, looking over Hermione's shoulder as she snuggled into his chest, clearly not intending to move for quite some time.

"Yes, after you conked out, they seemed to get their skates on, so to speak." Said Theo and Harry smiled eagerly.

"And..." He said, waving his hand in a demanding gesture.

"They both got life in Azkaban, and their powers bound. Not the Kiss, as apparently *someone* told the Wizengamot that he did not believe in the death penalty, which is what essentially the Dementor's Kiss amounts to." Said Sirius, his expression a mixture of pride and exasperation. Harry smiled ruefully.

"Well...I *might* have had a word in an ear or two...but I think they have got what they deserve. Life imprisonment and the inability to

use their magic. That sends a clear enough message I think. Merlin knows we do not need any more deaths.” He had the good grace to look a little sheepish. Truly, sometimes it scared Harry how much he was able to influence people in the Wizarding World. But that was just the way of it sometimes. Spying the nurse, Harry peered around his assorted friends and relatives, and deployed his most charming smile.

“Ah, Madame Pomfrey, when may I leave the Wing?” He asked, as politely as he could. Neither of them were under any illusions that he enjoyed being there, but he realised he didn’t have to act as though she was his captor.

“Well, there’s no lasting damage I suppose. But really! If I allow you to leave now, you must promise to take things easy!” She looked then at Hermione. “Miss Granger, surely you are sensible enough to ensure this young man rests *properly*?” She demanded, and Hermione did her level best to reassure the formidable MediWitch that she would see to it that Harry took his health seriously from now on.

“After all, aren’t any more baddies for Harry to fight!” She declared with a triumphant grin. Poppy just scowled and disappeared back into her office, muttering to herself all the while.

Harry was glad to be able to get out of the infirmary and settle back into his normal routine, well as normal as it got for him. He had not expected the standing ovation in the Great Hall however, and was really quite embarrassed by the whole thing. Especially when he noticed some non-students in the crowd. Even the Weasleys were there and seemed rather hopeful looking. He filed that thought away for consideration later.

But Hermione had explained that this was more for everyone else’s - the student’s and so on - benefit, than for his. He was their hero. Despite there having been a whole group of them that actually pulled off the mission which ended Voldemort’s reign of terror, he was the figurehead. He was the one who drove the sword through the snake-faced bastard’s chest. Seeing him made them happy, and they wanted to throw all the celebration parties all over again.

However, it was nearing the end of term, and NEWTS were fast approaching. The students who had been involved in the take down had a lot of catching up to do, and for once, did not groan or whinge when Hermione produced colour-coded revision schedules for them. In fact, they came in quite handy, and helped most of them do their homework and get caught up in a fairly short space of time.

Exams came and went, and were met with the usual combination of frustration and jubilation once they were finally over.

Harry, Hermione, Pansy, Draco, Blaise, Theo and Neville met up in one of the courtyards when they all finished their last examination. There was an almost subdued air to the group as they sat haphazardly on the ground, idly enjoying the warm sunshine. They sat in silence for a while before anyone spoke.

"It's going to be strange, leaving here." Said Neville quietly, saying out loud, what they were all thinking.

"I know what you mean. Here, we're sheltered from everything. Oh, not from Voldemort of course, but the rest of the world." Hermione said, and the others nodded.

"We have to get jobs and things." Put in Theo.

"And we won't see each other all the time. Well, not necessarily. We'll have to be all grown up and pay bills." Pansy added.

"Hey! We'll see each other. Most of us even bloody live together! And those that don't are welcome any time. My house will be home to anyone who wants it." Harry insisted, and his friends smiled in thanks.

"I know! Why don't we all have a big blow out! Like, go on holiday or something, for like, the summer?" Suggested Blaise, and the rest looked thoughtful.

"We'll need to be here when the babies are born..." Harry reminded them.

“But Mother isn’t due until the end of August. And Remus is due after her. So we’ve plenty of time.” Pansy looked hopefully at the others.

“Sounds quite do-able actually. I’ve always wanted to go to Las Vegas...” Ventured Draco and Blaise grinned.

“ Australia sounds promising to me. And what about New Zealand?” Suggested Theo.

“Ooh, I’m excited already! How about we make a round trip? Australia, then New Zealand, and then back round to Vegas? We could do the lot in six weeks!” Hermione was practically bouncing in her seat at the thought of being able to visit such great places. Harry threw an affectionate arm around her, and pulled her in for a scorching kiss. She was rather dazed by the end of it, and their friends were chuckling.

“You know what guys? I reckon that sounds like a plan.” Harry said holding his hand out, palm facing down. The purebloods who had stayed with the Blacks over last summer knew what this was about and the rest soon cottoned on. They all placed their hands over Harry’s and then laughed as he threw them all into the air.

This was going to be so much fun!

Somewhere in a corridor near the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

“Severus you bastard! If you ever come near me again I swear...”

“Now darling –“

“– don’t you ‘darling’ me! I should have got you neutered when I had the chance...Ow...”

“ ...”

“Well? Aren’t you going to say something? Hmm? Nothing to say is there, you know why? Eh? You know why? Because this is *ALL YOUR BLOODY FAULT!*”

“Belle, I wish I could take this pain away, but I can’t. Remember why we’re doing this love, hmm? We’re almost there now, and Poppy will be able to help, just a little further. *I love you.*”

“Ooh you bastard! Don’t give me all that fancy talk now! That’s what got us into this mess in the first place. I know! Where’s my wand? You’ve hidden my wand again haven’t you?! Just you wait you, you...GIT!”

“B-Belle, you remember Poppy said you weren’t to use any magic until after the baby is born, it could be dangerous, and –“

“I don’t care! Give me my wand! I want to give you a vasectomy, right now!”

“Dearest, I don’t think you’re in your right mind, just now, and – look! There’s the Hospital Wing, and ah – there’s Poppy. Come on now...

Somewhere a bit further away from the Hospital Wing, but no less urgent...

“Sirius! Will you stop fussing like a bloody woman, and help me down this corridor. As you can see, I’m a bit encumbered right now!”

“But Remy, it’s too early, the baby shouldn’t be coming yet...”

“Oh for pity’s sake! You would know that premature births are common in male pregnancies, particularly with werewolves, if you had been paying attention to Madame Pomfrey, but nooo...you don’t do you, because you NEVER BLOODY LISTEN AND AAAAHHH!!”

“That’s it honey, breathe, like they showed you remember, hee hee hee, haa haa haa...”

“You sound like a bloody donkey, stop hawing at me and help me down this bloody corridor!”

“Uh...”

“Merlin! Is this the longest fucking corridor in existence or what, I, AAAGHHH! URGH! PADFOOT, GET YOUR HANDS OFF ME!”

“Remy, I was just trying to help...Ah! Madame Pomfrey! Help me! Uh, I mean, help Remus...”

“...Now darling, don't be hasty, just lower the scalpel and we can talk about this rationally...AAAAAH! HELP! She's got a knife!”

The doors of the Hospital Wing banged open as Severus slammed through them, ducking and dashing away like the Hounds of Hell were on his heels. Hiding in a nearby alcove, he failed to notice the group gathered outside until they started laughing at him.

“Oh, laugh now, while you can. Just you wait until it's *your* turn. You won't find it so funny then...” He muttered, a glint of crazed promise in his eyes. A few of the men gulped, but before they could comment, Belle's screech came through the doors that Snape had just fled through.

“SEVERUS!”

“I think that's your cue old man.” Harry said urbanely, and earned himself a snort in response.

Rolling his shoulders, and adopting a stance like a man about to be led to the gallows, Snape took a deep breath, and then walked back into the Ward. The boys tipped imaginary hats in recognition of his bravery, and then settled back in to wait.

They didn't have to wait long before a wailing cry broke the silence of the corridor, which was shortly followed by another shrill cry as two people entered the world for the first time, and made damn sure that everyone knew they were there.

The teenagers and adults in the hallway glanced at each other excitedly and tried peaking through the windows to see what was happening inside. Blaise and Theo got boffed in the nose when Madame Pomfrey pushed the doors open and stepped away rubbing

their noses and shooting the matron offended looks. She merely shrugged it off and addressed the group as a whole.

“Professors Snape have a healthy baby girl, seven pounds and one ounce, and Professors Black have a healthy baby boy, 7 pounds and nine ounces. They’ve asked me to tell you for the sake of the betting pool which was so *inappropriately* set up that their names are: Ruby Lily Snape and Rocco James Black. Now, the 'mothers' are both very tired, as are the infants, so you may only enter two at a time. Who will be first?” She said and waited while everyone clamoured forwards to be the first ones to see the new babies.

It was agreed rather quickly that Albus and Harry would go in first, and the others were sorted into pairs after that. Entering the Hospital Wing and setting eyes on the two families and their little ones for the first time was a very humbling experience for both men.

Albus had seen countless births of children, since many of his past pupils invited him as a witness, but none affected him as much as the child of his Potions Master. The man truly deserved this, and he and his wife looked so happy, that it brought a tear to this old man’s eyes.

The new parents looked up to see their visitors, and smiled, their eyes full of warm welcome and absolute joy.

“Albus, Harry. Come, there are some people we would like you to meet.”
